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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

September 13, 1893.

No. 777.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LX.



OR,

The Masked Men of Grand Canyon.

A Romance of the Dread Driver
of the Colorado.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF THE "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE HERMIT OF THE GRAND CANYON.

A HORSEMAN drew rein one morning, upon the brink of what is one of the wonders of the world, yet seen by very few—the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

A mighty abyss, too vast for the eye to take in its grand immensity; a mighty mountain rent asunder and forming a chasm which is a valley of grandeur and beauty, through which flows

BUFFALO BILL FOUND A RETREAT UPON THE CLIFF GIVING HIM A VIEW
IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.

the Colorado Grande, and with ranges of mountains towering to cloudland on all sides; cliffs of scarlet, blue, violet, yes, all hues of the rainbow; crystal streams flowing merrily along; verdant meadows, vales and hills, with massive forests everywhere—such was the sight that met the admiring gaze of the horseman as he sat there in his saddle, his horse looking down into the canyon.

It was a spot avoided by Indians as the abiding place of evil spirits; a scene shunned by white men, to whom it is yet, save to a few, a *terra incognita*; a mighty retreat where a fugitive, it would seem, would be forever safe, no matter what the crime that had driven him to seek a refuge there.

Adown from where the horseman had halted, was the bare trace of a trail, winding around the edge of an overhanging rock by a shelf that was not a yard in width and which only a man could tread whose head was cool and heart fearless.

Wrapt in admiration at the scene, the mist-clouds floating lazily upward from the canyon, the silver ribbon far away that revealed the winding river, and the songs of birds coming from a hundred leafy retreats on the hillsides, the horseman gave a deep sigh, as though memories most sad were awakened in his breast by the scene, and then dismounting began to unwrap a lariat from his saddle-horn.

He was dressed as a miner, wore a slouch hat, was of commanding presence, and his darkly bronzed face, heavily bearded, was full of determination, intelligence and expression.

Two led horses, carrying heavy packs, were behind the animal he rode, and attaching the lariats to their bits he took one end and led the way down the most perilous and picturesque trail along the shelf running around the jutting point of rocks.

When he drew near the narrowest point, he took off the saddle and packs, and one at a time led the horses downward and around the hazardous rocks.

A false step, a movement of fright in one of the animals, would send him downward to the depths more than a mile below.

But the trembling animals seemed to have perfect confidence in their master, and after a long while he got them by the point of greatest peril.

Going back and forward he carried the packs and saddles, and replacing them upon the animals began once more the descent of the only trail leading down into the Grand Canyon, from that side.

The way was rugged, most dangerous in places, and several times his horses barely escaped a fall over the precipice, the coolness, and strong arm of the man alone saving them from death, and his stores from destruction.

It was nearly sunset when he at last reached the bottom of the stupendous rift, and only the tops of the cliffs were tinged with the golden light, the valley being in densest shadow.

Going on along the canyon at a brisk pace, as though anxious to reach some camping-place before nightfall, after a ride of several miles he came in sight of a wooded canyon, entering the one he was then in, and with heights towering toward heaven so far that all below seemed as black as night.

But a stream wound out of the canyon, to mingle its clear waters with the grand Colorado River a mile away, and massive trees grew near at hand, sheltering a cabin that stood upon the sloping hill at the base of a cliff that arose thousands of feet above it.

When within a few hundred yards of the lone cabin, suddenly there was a crashing, grinding sound, a terrific roar, a rumbling, and the earth seemed shaken violently as the whole face of the mighty cliff came crushing down into the valley, sending up showers of splintered rocks and clouds of dust that were blinding and appalling!

Back from the scene of danger fled the frightened horses, the rider showing no desire to check their flight until a spot of safety was reached.

Then, half a mile from the fallen cliff he paused, his face white, his whole form quivering, while his horses stood trembling with terror.

"My God! the cliff has fallen upon my home, and my unfortunate comrade lies buried beneath a mountain of rocks."

"We mined too far beneath the cliff, thus causing a cave-in."

"A few minutes more and I would also have been buried, shared poor Langley's fate; but a strange destiny it is that protects me from death—a strange one indeed!"

"He is gone, and I alone am now the Hermit of the Grand Canyon, a Cæsus in wealth of gold, yet a fugitive from my fellow-men."

"What a fate is mine, and how will it all end, I wonder?"

Thus musing the Hermit Miner sat upon his own horse listening to the echoes rumbling through the Grand Canyon, growing fainter and fainter, like a retreating army fighting off its pursuing foes.

CHAPTER II.

FOREWARNED.

AN hour passed before the unnerved man felt able to seek a camp for the night, so great had been the shock upon him of the falling cliff, and the fate he had felt had overtaken his comrade.

At last he rode on up the canyon once more, determined to seek a spot he knew well where he could camp, a couple of miles above his destroyed home.

He passed the pile of rocks, heaped far up the cliff from which they had fallen, looking upon them as the sepulcher of his companion.

"Poor Lucas Langley!"

"He too had his sorrows, his secrets, which drove him, like me, to seek a retreat far from mankind, and become a hunted man."

"Alas! what has the future in store for me?"

With a sigh he rode on up the valley, his way now guided by the moonlight alone, and at last turned into another canyon, for the Grand Canyon has hundreds of others branching off from it, and some of them penetrating for miles back into the mountains.

He had gone up this canyon for a few hundred yards, and was just about to halt, and go into camp upon the banks of a small stream, when his eyes caught sight of a light ahead.

"Ah! what does that mean?" he ejaculated in surprise.

Hardly had he spoken when from up the canyon came the deep voice of a dog barking, his scent telling him of a human presence near.

"Ah! Savage is not dead then, and after all, what I had no hope of whatever, Lucas Langley may have escaped death," and the horseman rode quickly on toward the light.

The barking of the dog continued, but it was not a note of warning but of welcome, and as the horseman drew rein by a camp-fire a huge brute sprang up and greeted him with every manifestation of delight, while a man came forward from the shadows of the trees and cried:

"Thank Heaven you are back again, Pard Seldon, for I had begun to fear for your safety."

"And I was sure that I would never meet you again in life, Lucas, for I believed you at the bottom of that mountain of rocks that fell from the cliff and crushed out our little home," and the hands of the two men met in a warm grasp.

"It would have been so, but for a warning I had, when working in the mine."

"I saw that the cliff was splitting and settling, and running out I discovered that it must fall, and before very long."

"I at once got the two mules out of the canyon above, packed all our traps upon them, and hastened away to a spot of safety."

"Then I returned and got all else I could find, gathered up our gold, and came here and made our camp."

"To-night the cliff fell, but not expecting you to arrive by night, I was to be on the watch for you in the morning; but thank Heaven you are safe and home again."

"And I am happy to find you safe, Lucas."

"I was within an eighth of a mile of the cliff when it fell, and I shall never forget the sight, the sound, the appalling dread for a few moments, as I fled to a spot of safety, my horses bearing me along like the wind in their mad terror."

"It was appalling, and I have not dared leave my camp since, far as I am from it, for it resounded through the canyons like a mighty battle with heavy guns."

"But, come, comrade, and we will have supper and talk over all that has happened."

The horses were staked out up the canyon, where grass and water were plentiful, and then the two men sat down to supper, though neither seemed to have much of an appetite after what had occurred.

But Savage, the huge, vicious-looking dog, felt no bad results from his fright of a few hours before, and ate heartily.

When their pipes were lighted the man who had lately arrived said:

"Well, Lucas, I brought back provisions and other things to last us a year, and I care not to go again from this canyon until I carry a fortune in gold with me."

"Yes, here we are safe, and I feel that something has happened to cause you to say what you do, pard."

"And I will tell you what it is," impressively returned the one who had spoken of himself as the Hermit of the Grand Canyon.

"Yes," he added slowly. "I will tell you a secret, comrade."

CHAPTER III.

THE MINER'S SECRET.

"PARD, after what has happened, the falling of the cliff, and our narrow escape from death, I feel little like sleep, tired as I am, so, as I said, I will tell you a secret," continued Andrew Seldon, speaking in a way that showed his thoughts were roaming in the past.

"You will have a good listener, pard," was the answer.

"Yes, I feel that I will, and you having told me that you were a fugitive from the law, that your life had its curse upon it, I will tell you of mine, at least enough of it to prove to you that I also dare not show my face among my fellow-men."

"You know me as Andrew Seldon, and I have with me proof that I could show to convince one that such is my name; but, in reality, Andrew Seldon is dead, and I am simply playing his part in life, for I am not unlike him in appearance, and, as I said, I have the proofs that enable me to impersonate him."

"My real name is Wallace Weston, whom circumstances beyond my control made a murderer and fugitive, and here I am."

"I entered the army as a private cavalry soldier, and worked my way up to sergeant, with the hope of getting a commission some day."

"But one day another regiment came to the frontier post where I was stationed, and a member of it was the man to whom I owed all my sorrow and misfortune in life."

"Well, the recognition was mutual, a quarrel followed, and he—his name was Manton Mayhew—fell by my hand, and he, too, was a sergeant."

"I said nothing in my defense, for I would not reopen the story of the past for curious eyes to gaze upon, and accepted my fate, my sentence being to be shot to death."

"On one occasion, in an Indian fight, I had saved the life of the scout Buffalo Bill—"

"Ah, yes, I know of him," said the listener, earnestly.

"He, in return, rode through the Indian country, to the quarters of the district commander, to try and get a reprieve, hoping to glean new evidence to clear me."

"He was refused, and returned just as I was led down on the banks of the river for execution."

"I heard the result and determined in a second, to escape, or be killed in the attempt."

"Buffalo Bill's horse stood near, and with a bound I was upon his back, rushed him into the stream, swam across and escaped."

"I was fired upon by the scout, under an order to do so, but his bullets were not aimed to kill me."

"Night was near at hand, and pursuit was begun, but I had a good start, reached the desert and entered it."

"The next day, for the scout's horse was worn down, my pursuers would have over-

taken me had I not suddenly come upon a stray horse in a clump of timber, an oasis in the desert.

"I mounted him and pushed straight on into the desert, and the next day came upon a solitary rock, by which lay the dead body of a man upon which the coyotes had just begun to feed.

"He had starved to death in the desert, and the horse I had found was his.

"At once an idea seized me to let my pursuer believe that I was that dead man; so I dressed him in my uniform, killed the horse near him, left the scout's saddle and bridle there, and started off on foot over the desert, attired as the man whom I had found there.

"With him I had found letters, papers, and a map and diary, and these gave me his name, and more, for I found that the map would lead me to a gold-mine, the one in this canyon in which we have worked so well to our great profit.

"I wandered back, off the desert, and you know the rest: how I came to the camp where you lay wounded and threatened with death by your comrade, Black Heart Bill, who knew that you had a mine which he was determined to have.

"In Black Heart Bill I recognized a brother of Sergeant Manton Mayhew, another man whom I sought revenge upon.

"Hugh Mayhew had also wronged me as his brothers had, for there were three of them, strange to say—triplets—Manton, Hugh and Richard Mayhew, and to them I owed it that I became a fugitive from home.

"You remember my duel with Hugh Mayhew, and that he fell by my hand?

"Well, there is one more yet, and some day we may meet, and then it must be his life or mine.

"Taking the name of Andrew Seldon, and leaving all to believe that I, Wallace Weston, died in the desert, I came here, with you as my companion.

"We are growing rich, and though the Cliff Mine has fallen in, there are others that will pan out even better.

"But, pard, when I went to the post this time for provisions, I came upon Buffalo Bill escorting a deserter to Fort Faraway, and a band of desperadoes from the mines of Last Chance had ambushed him to rescue the prisoner.

"I went to the rescue of the scout, saved him and his prisoner, and went on my way to the post; but yet I half believe, in spite of believing me dead, and my changed appearance with my long hair and beard, that Buffalo Bill half recognized me.

"I must take no more chances, so shall remain close in this canyon until ready to leave it and go far away with my fortune, to enjoy it elsewhere.

"Again, pard: I had written to the home of Andrew Seldon, whom I am now impersonating, and I find that he, too, was a fugitive from the law, and that there is no reason for me to share this fortune with any one there, as I had intended to do; so now let us be lost to the world, hermits here in this weird land of mystery, the Grand Canyon, where no one dares come, until we are ready to seek new associations and homes elsewhere, and enjoy our riches."

"Pard, I thank you for your confidence, your secret. I felt that you had been a sufferer in the past, while I am sure you were not the one to do the first wrong.

"In all things I will be guided by you," said Lucas Langley warmly, and it being late the two men retired to their blankets to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GRAVE AT THE DESERTED CAMP.

Two men had met in the remote wilds of the Grand Canyon country, as the district bordering upon the Colorado River was called, having appointed a mysterious, deserted camp as a rendezvous.

One of these men needs no description from my pen, hardly more than a passing pen introduction to say that he bore the name of Buffalo Bill.

He had come alone from Fort Faraway, to the deserted camp over a hundred miles from the nearest habitation, to meet a new-found friend, one known in Last Chance

Claim as "Doctor Dick," and a man of mystery.

The latter was, in person, almost as striking in appearance as was handsome, dashing Bill Cody, for he was tall, sinewy in build, graceful, and dressed in a way to attract attention, with his cavalry boots, gold spurs, corduroy pants, velvet jacket, silk shirt and broad black sombrero encircled by a chain of gold links.

Doctor Dick, too, was not afraid either to make a lavish display of jewels, his weapons were gold-mounted, as was also his saddle and bridle, and from the fact that he was an ardent and successful gambler, and was supposed to be very rich, he was called in Last Chance "The Gold King."

Doctor Dick had made his debut into Last Chance mining-camp, by bringing in the coach, one day, with the dead body of the driver on the box by his side, and two murdered passengers on the inside.

He had run off, single-handed, the road-agents who had held up the coach, and therefore became a hero at once, adding to his fame very quickly by showing that he could "shoot to kill" when attacked.

Signifying his intention of practicing medicine and surgery in Last Chance, and gambling in his leisure moments, Doctor Dick had established himself in a pleasant cabin near the hotel, to at once become popular, and began to make money.

When Buffalo Bill went to Last Chance on a special Secret Service mission, to investigate the holding up of the coach, and had recognized there a deserter, whom he had orders to take "dead or alive," Doctor Dick had helped him out of what appeared to be a very ugly scrape, and thus the two men had become friends.

Becoming confidential, Doctor Dick had told the scout a few chapters of his life, and he alone doubted that his foe from boyhood, Sergeant Wallace Weston—who had been reported as dying in the desert while seeking to escape—was dead, and the two, the scout and the gambler doctor, had arranged to meet at the deserted camp and discover if the real truth could not be ascertained.

So it was at the deserted camp they had met, and Doctor Dick had stood with uncovered head before a quaking aspen tree, at the foot of which was a grave.

Upon the tree had been cut a name and date, and this told that there lay the form of Hugh Mayhew, killed in a duel by one whom he had wronged.

It further told that Hugh Mayhew was known in the mines as a desperado, whose cruel deeds had gained for him the sobriquet of Black Heart Bill.

Convinced that the body in the grave was that of Hugh Mayhew, after he had unearthed the remains, and recognizing in that decaying form his once brother—one of the triplets born to his mother—Doctor Dick had seemed deeply moved when he told that he was the last of the trio and lived to avenge them: that he was sure Wallace Weston, their old foe, was their slayer, for he knew from the scout that he had killed his brother Manton at the fort, and hence he would not be convinced that the grave in the desert of Arizona held the body of Weston until he had certain proof of it.

"That man who came to your rescue, who called himself the Hermit of the Grand Canyon, who sought to shun you after his service to you, is either Wallace Weston, or knows something of him, and it is his trail we must pick up on his return to his retreat, and follow to the end, before I am satisfied," Doctor Dick had said to Buffalo Bill.

And so it was that the two had met at the deserted camp to pick up the trail of the Hermit and follow it to the end, bring what it might to Doctor Dick.

CHAPTER V.

THE FATE OF A FOE.

THE trail of the Hermit of the Grand Canyon—who had told the secret to his companion that he was impersonating another man, one whom he knew to be dead, to whom he owed the discovery of the gold-mine then making him rich—was taken up by Buffalo Bill, and his comrade, Doctor Dick, and followed to the brink of the grandest view in all Nature's marvels, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

To a less experienced scout than Buffalo Bill, there would have appeared to be no trail down into the depths of that mighty chasm, and it would have been thought that the one whom they trailed had retraced his steps from there.

But the scout was not one to be thrown off the trail by any obstacle that perseverance, pluck and hard work could overcome, and so he set about finding a way down into the canyon, though there was no trace of a traveled path left on the solid rocks upon which he stood.

Doctor Dick's determined assertion that he did not believe his old enemy, Wallace Weston, to be dead, really impressed the scout in spite of the fact that he had guided Lieutenant Tompkins and his troopers in the pursuit of the fugitive soldier, had found the body torn by wolves, dressed in uniform, and with his own saddle and bridle, taken when he had dashed away upon his horse, lying by his side.

Still, in the face of all these seeming proofs, the fugitive sergeant might yet be alive, and he would do all he could to solve the mystery as to whether he was or not.

The scout had been anxious to go alone with the gambler doctor, in the search, for he did have the hope that, if really found, Wallace Weston might be reconciled with Doctor Dick, while, if taken by troopers, he would be returned to the fort and executed, as he was under death sentence.

Buffalo Bill never forgot a service rendered him, and he did not wish to see the sergeant put to death, where he was already believed to be dead, and the secret might be kept.

After a long search Buffalo Bill found the perilous path down which the one he followed had gone with his pack-horses.

He revealed the fact to Doctor Dick, and the two, after a long consultation, decided to take the risk and make the descent into the Grand Valley.

For men with less nerve than these two possessed it would have been impossible; and, as it was, there were times when the winding trail and dangers put their pluck to the test.

At last the valley was reached, and greatly relieved, the two went into camp before prosecuting their search further.

The Hermit had admitted to Buffalo Bill, whom they had lately met upon the trail, that he had a comrade dwelling with him in his retreat, wherever that retreat was.

Would it be that they held a secret there they did not wish known, and so would resist the intrusion of others?

It might be, and that a death-struggle would follow the discovery of their retreat.

Still, Buffalo Bill was not one to dread whatever might turn up, and he had seen Doctor Dick tried and proven true as steel and brave as a lion.

And so the search continued, the scout unerringly clinging to the trail until, just as the two felt that the retreat of those mysterious dwellers in the Grand Canyon was almost before them, they came upon a sight that caused them to draw rein and sit upon their horses appalled at the scene presented to their view.

What they saw was the fallen cliff, and there, just peering out from among the piles of rocks, was the shattered end of a stout cabin.

They had found the secret retreat, but they stood there feeling that those who had dwelt in that ruined cabin were beyond all human eye, buried beneath a monument of rocks an army could not remove in weeks.

"And this is the end?" said Buffalo Bill, the first to speak, breaking a silence that was appalling.

"Yes, his end, for he undoubtedly lies buried there beneath that mass of rock.

"If it is my foe, Wallace Weston, who has met such a fate, so let it be."

The two did not tarry long in the canyon, for a dread of the weird spot seemed to have come over them both.

Doctor Dick roamed about, picking up bits of rock and examining it closely, while he muttered:

"It was a gold-mine that held them here, but that falling cliff has hidden the secret forever."

And Buffalo Bill went about searching for trails, yet made no comment, whether he

found any or not, to indicate that the lone dwellers in the canyon had not both perished in their cabin, and lay buried beneath the hills of rock that had fallen from the heights above the valley.

But, as the two men rode away up the dangerous mountain-trail, there were eyes peering upon them they little dreamed, and Wallace Weston muttered:

"They believe me dead now; so let it be."

CHAPTER VI.

A VOW OF VENGEANCE.

THE night after leaving the Grand Canyon, Buffalo Bill and Doctor Dick camped again at the rendezvous of the deserted camp, which was marked by the grave of Black Heart Bill.

The two friends talked until a late hour into the night, though they intended making an early start in the morning for their respective homes, the scout going to the fort, the doctor to Last Chance.

"Well, Cody, you were satisfied before that Sergeant Wallace Weston was dead, that he died in the desert, but you yielded to my belief that he lived and was none other than the Hermit of the Grand Canyon who came to your rescue some time ago; but now you are assured, that the Hermit Miner, being buried beneath the walls of his cabin, there is no doubt left that, if he really was Wallace Weston, now he is surely not among the living?"

"Yes, doctor, I can hardly bring myself to believe that Weston's body was not the one we buried in the desert, yet, I grant that it was just possible that it might not have been his."

"So you give up the search wholly?"

"Yes, I return to my duties at Fort Faraway."

"And I to my doctoring and gambling at Last Chance; but I thank you for coming with me on this trip, as my mind is made up."

The doctor said no more then, but wrapped his blankets about him and lay down to rest.

The next morning when the two were about to part Buffalo Bill said:

"I wish you would keep your eye upon the suspicious characters in the mines, for I fear, with the temptations in their way to get hold of treasure in the coaches, there may be more mischief done."

"I will keep a bright lookout, Cody, and at once send a courier to report at the fort, any lawless deeds that may be done, for I know that your support will be prompt."

Then the two parted, Buffalo Bill taking the trail for Fort Faraway and Doctor Dick going on to Last Chance mining-camp.

But, hardly had the scout disappeared from sight, when the doctor halted, looked back and then slowly returned to the camp.

Dismounting by the grave, he stood gazing at the inscription cut into the tree for some minutes, and then turned his eyes upon the mound at his feet.

"Wicked, yes, hated and feared, yet my brother, and I loved him and my other brother Manton, with a love that was greater than woman's love, and I revere their memory now."

"Whatever they were, whatever the crimes that led to their losing their lives, I must avenge them, and I will, for Wallace Weston's hand it was that did the deed."

"Yes, he killed Manton, and I am just as sure that he killed Hugh, who lies here at my feet."

"Buffalo Bill believes Wallace Weston dead; but I do not!"

"No, I can never believe that he could die except by my hand, and some day we, two will meet face to face, and then he will die, and I will be avenged for Manton's and Hugh's deaths; so here I vow to take the life of Wallace Weston, and thus avenge my brothers."

He raised his right hand as he spoke, pressed his left over his heart and so registered his vow of revenge.

Then, mounting his horse he rode away upon the trail he had before followed.

He seemed in no hurry, rode slowly, made long noonday camps and camped early at night, so that it was the afternoon of the third day before he came in view of the scattered settlement of Last Chance Claim.

Situated in a mountain canyon, which widened into a large valley after some miles, with towering cliffs, rugged passes and wild, picturesque scenery upon all sides, Last Chance Claim, or mining-camp, was scattered along for miles, the village portion, where the hotel, stores and gambling saloons were, being at the upper end.

As he came out of a mountain pass into the valley proper, Doctor Dick beheld crowds of miners hastening toward the hotel, and all were carrying their rifles and had an excited air.

"Well, pards, what has happened?" he asked as he put spurs to his horse and overtook a party of miners on the way to the hotel.

The response he received caused him to spur forward and dash rapidly on to the head of the valley.

CHAPTER VII.

MASKED AND MERCILESS.

DAVE DOCKERY had taken the place of driver on the Last Chance trail, after Bud Benton had been killed on the box by unknown parties.

Dave Dockery was as shrewd as he was brave, and bore many scars of wounds received in the discharge of his duty, his nerve and endurance, it was said, saving his life where other men would surely have been killed.

The coach out from Last Chance had gone on its dangerous run with a very large sum in gold dust, but Dave had gotten safely through with it, and was congratulated by all who knew the chances he had taken of losing booty and life.

He had heard with regret, after reaching his eastern destination, that he was to be put to an equal strain going back, for a large sum of money in bank bills was to be sent back to Last Chance in payment for several mines purchased there by outsiders.

Dave was told that the box contained at least thirty thousand dollars, and so he hid it away as best he could in the coach.

He also was carrying out as freight a dozen rifles of the last and most improved repeating pattern, and double as many revolvers, intended for the Vigilantes of Last Chance, and who were personally unknown to any of the miners, though it was suspected that either Landlord Larry, the hotel-keeper, "judge," store-keeper, and proprietor of the largest gambling saloon in the place, or Doctor Dick the Gambler Gold King was the secret leader.

Whoever the Vigilante captain and his men might be, it was certain that they had a good influence over the most lawless spirits in the mines, the fact of their being unknown greatly aiding their good effect.

Dave Dockery had hoped that he would have a stage load of passengers upon the run to Last Chance, for he liked to have a crowd along, and then he felt that they were a safeguard as well, as in numbers there was strength.

But, when starting time came, only two passengers appeared, one of them a miner going out to Last Chance to hunt for a fortune, and the other a young man who told Dave Dockery that he was only traveling from a love of adventure, and enjoyed the wild life he thus far had met with.

He gave Dave a bunch of good cigars, showed him a silver flask of fine brandy, and was promptly invited to ride upon the box with him, an invitation that was as promptly accepted.

Out of the little settlement rolled the coach, followed by a cheer from the crowd gathered to see it depart, for the going and coming of the coaches in border places are events of great moment to the dwellers there.

The young man in search of adventure was upon the box with Dave, and the miner passenger was inside, where it was safer for him to ride, as he was in a hopeless state of intoxication.

The horses dashed away in fine style, enthused by the cheer of the crowd, and Dave looked happy and proud, while his companion on the box appeared to enjoy the scene immensely.

The young stranger was well dressed, for he had donned what was suitable for frontier roughing it, and wore in his belt a single re-

volver, as a means of defense rather than for show or bravado.

He had a fine face, fearless and frank, and looked like a man of refinement and education.

Dave Dockery was a good reader of human nature and took to his passenger at once, being really greatly pleased with his companionship.

Three fourths of the trail had been gone over without adventure, the three stops at the relay stations for changes of horses and meals for passengers, having been made on time, and Last Chance was but a dozen miles away, when, as they neared a dreary looking spot in a gorge, Dave said:

"There is where poor Bud Benton passed in his chips, pard, and I tell you I don't like the spot a bit."

Hardly had he uttered the words when a sharp report rung out and Dave Dockery fell back upon the coach and lay motionless, while out of the shadows spurred a horseman dressed in black and wearing a red mask.

With his revolver leveled at the stranger he said sharply:

"Your turn next, sir, for I am out for blood and gold."

CHAPTER VIII.

AT HIS MERCY.

RIDING on the box with Dave Dockery, the young stranger had heard much of the wild ways of the border, and had been told that it would be madness to resist a "hold-up" of a coach, unless the chances were well on the side of those attacked.

When therefore the sharp report of a revolver had been followed by the toppling over of poor Dave, and a masked horseman rode out of the shadows of the cliff, his revolver covering him, the young man did not just know what to do.

He had with him a few hundred in money, his watch, chain and a few articles of value, with some papers of importance.

That the masked horseman was alone he could not believe, and yet he had, against all traditions of the border, begun by firing upon Dave Dockery, and not ordering him to halt first.

That he had fired to kill, the bullet wound in the breast, and the motionless form of the driver as he lay back upon the top of the coach, were in evidence.

Now he stood the chance himself of life and death, and he awaited the ordeal with white, but calm face.

The horses had stopped in their tracks, and though no other persons were visible the stranger looked for others to appear.

The thought flashed across him that he must lose all he had with him, but his life he could not believe was in danger, yet, why the masked road-agent had killed Dockery without mercy he could not understand.

"Do you mean to take my life, man?"

"That depends whether it is worth more to kill you than to let you live," was the business-like reply.

But hardly had he spoken when from out of the coach window came a flash and report. The miner within, awakening to a sense of his danger, had taken a hand in the affair.

The bullet barely missed the head of the masked horseman, who at once returned the fire, aiming first, however, at the young man on the box.

With a groan the latter fell heavily to the ground, his revolver half-drawn from its holster, and the murderer, leaping from his saddle took refuge among the horses while he called out:

"I have killed your two comrades, and you share the same fate unless you surrender."

"I cry quits, pard," came in frightened tones from the coach, and the man was evidently now sobered and greatly alarmed.

"Then come out!"

The miner quickly threw open the stage door, put his foot upon the step and then peered cautiously toward his foe.

Instantly there came a shot, and, without a moan, he pitched forward head-foremost and fell in a heap between the wheels.

"Any more?" called out the road-agent, sternly.

No answer came, and, revolvers in hand, he stepped to one side and opened fire at the coach.

He fired with both hands, and did not cease until he had emptied his weapons and riddled the coach.

Then he unslung his rifle from his saddle-horn and cautiously approached, ready to fire at the first sign of danger to himself.

But he had done his work but too well, and he had nothing to fear, so advancing to the coach, found that it was empty.

Quickly he set about searching the vehicle for all of value that it might carry.

He found a roll of bills belonging to the miner, and a few things of value in his valise.

The young man panned out for him nearly a thousand in money, and some jewelry, and Dave Dockery was pretty well supplied with funds.

But the Masked Marauder searched rapidly on, and evidently looked for a richer haul yet.

The box was found with the money in it, and a bullet fired from his revolver shattered the lock.

"Ah! here is a haul worth all risks to get," he muttered, and the contents of the chest were put in a sack and tied upon his saddle.

His work thus far had taken but a few minutes, and, apparently satisfied with what booty he had secured, he shot one of the wheel horses, to prevent the team going on with the coach, and, mounting the splendid animal he rode, and which was covered, head and all, with a black calico covering, he dashed away down the pass at a gallop.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUMB MESSENGER.

HARDLY had the masked road-agent ridden away, when a deep groan came from the lips of Dave Dockery.

His eyes opened, and after a supreme effort, which cost him the greatest agony, as moans would force themselves through his shut teeth, he was able to slip down from the box to the ground.

He knelt by the side of the man who had been his companion a few minutes before, full of life and vigor, and found him motionless.

Then he crept on hands and knees to the side of the miner.

"Dead!" came from between his clinched teeth.

After several efforts he arose by aid of a wheel to his feet, and taking a piece of paper and pencil from his pocket, wrote a few lines upon it with the greatest of difficulty.

Making his way, supported by the coach, step by step to the wheel-horse that stood chained to his dead comrade, he unhitched him from the pole, fastened the slip of paper to the bridle, and gave him a blow.

"Go! old horse, for I cannot ride you; I am too weak to hold myself on your back."

"Go for help to Last Chance, and maybe if you hurry you may save my life."

The horse seemed to understand what was said to him and started off at a swift trot down the trail.

He was just disappearing from sight when Dockery, unable to longer stand up, tottered and fell by the side of the trail, writhing in his agony.

And while he lay thus, the faithful horse increased his speed to a gallop and went along thus for miles, his trace-chains rattling an accompaniment to his hoof-falls as he followed the trail to Last Chance.

Halting at a stream here and there for a drink of cool water, and at a grassy bank for a few mouthfuls of food, the horse held on his way, and a couple of hours after his departure from the coach, galloped into the mining-camp.

Those who saw him with the harness on felt sure that some harm had befallen the coach, and they hastened after the animal, who, avoiding capture, dashed up to the hotel door and halted.

Lawrence Larimore, nicknamed Landlord Larry, had seen him coming, and grasped his bridle-rein as he halted.

He had caught sight of the white slip of paper tied upon the bridle, and quickly se-

curing it, read what was written thereon in the weak and wavering hand of the wounded driver, but which was recognized as the writing of Dave Dockery.

It was as follows, for Landlord Larry read it aloud, as the miners quickly gathered about him:

"Coach held up at Bud Benton's grave, and I fatally wounded."

"One passenger on box killed; miner in coach also."

"Coach robbed of large sum."

"Road-agent was alone, wore black domino and red mask, horse also masked, but feel sure I know him."

"I have just strength to write this and beg quick aid, sending it by one of my wheelers."

"Come quickly if you hope to find me alive."

"DAVE."

A roar went up from the crowd of miners at the reading of this note from Dave Dockery, who even then might be dying, and Landlord Larry cried:

"Spread the alarm, and let us go quickly to ther spot, and try and save poor Dave, yes, and capture that masked road-agent, for he has got money in plenty."

"Oh! if Doctor Dick was only here to look after poor Dave, he might save him."

"Let me see! the coach was due at Bud Benton's grave about two o'clock and it is now after three."

"Come, men, mount and follow me!"

Dave Dockery was liked by all, and Landlord Larry was a very popular man; so, quickly, the miners obeyed the call to follow the one to the rescue of the other.

Just as the party of mounted men were about to ride away from the hotel, under the leadership of Landlord Larry, a shout was heard down the valley, and then came the cry from a score of men:

"There comes Doctor Dick!"

With an exclamation of pleasure Landlord Larry put spurs to his horse and dashed forward to meet the doctor, who warmly grasped his hand as the two met and called out:

"What is it, Landlord Larry?"

"Read this paper from Dave Dockery, who even now may be dead. We are going to his aid now."

"And I will go with you."

"But your horse is worn out, Doc, and you look tired after your long trail."

"Don't mind me, for I will mount a fresh horse and follow," and Doctor Dick rode rapidly toward his own cabin.

CHAPTER X.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

THE eyes of the miners followed the doctor, on his rapid ride to his quarters, with a look as though all depended upon him.

They had come to almost revere this handsome, stern, mysterious man who had come to dwell among them, yet seemed so well-fitted to adorn a far different life.

His life was as a sealed book to them, yet his skill as physician and surgeon was great, his generosity unbounded, and his nerve and daring far above those with whom he had been forced to meet in deadly encounter.

He had made his home in a snugly built cabin under the shelter of a cliff within easy walk of the hotel, where he took his meals.

He had fitted his frontier home with an extravagance and comfort that was surprising, and had in a cabin near several as fine horses as could be found among the mining-camps, with a Chinese servant to look after them and his wants.

The doctor hastily dismounted, called to the Chinaman to throw his saddle upon another horse and look after the pack-animal, entered the cabin for a few moments and before Landlord Larry and his party were a couple of miles away was in rapid pursuit.

He did not spare his horse, and overtaking the crowd of half a hundred miner horse-men, he was greeted with a cheer, which he acknowledged by gracefully raising his sombrero.

Riding to the front of the column he took his place by the side of Landlord Larry, and set a faster pace than that at which they had been going.

"You say that Dave Dockery was able to write a note, landlord?"

"Yes, I handed it to you to-day."

"I thrust it into my pocket unread," and Doctor Dick now glanced over the note as he rode along.

"I fear he is too far gone, Larry, for if he had been able he would have come into the camp."

"I will ride still faster, for every moment counts with a badly wounded man, and you see I am mounted on my racer."

"Push on, do, Doc, and I'll follow with the men as fast as I can," cried the landlord.

With a word to Racer the horse was off like an arrow and fairly flew up and down hill along the rugged trail to reach the scene of the tragedy and lend aid to the wounded driver.

At last the coach came in sight, and the coming miners were yet all of two miles behind.

The four coach-horses, still attached to the pole, stood where they had been left by their driver, while the wheel-horse shot by the road-agent lay where he had fallen.

Near the coach, to one side, and not twenty paces from where Bud Benton had been killed, lay the form of Dave Dockery.

Throwing himself from his saddle Doctor Dick bent over him and said quickly:

"He still lives!"

"Dave! Dave! speak to me!"

The eyes slowly opened, and there was a convulsive movement of the form, a struggle which becoming violent caused the doctor to grasp him firmly, and thus hold him.

The dying man seemed in an agony of despair at being unable to speak, and after a slight resistance ceased his efforts and sunk back exhausted.

"Here, Dave, take this, for it will revive you," and Doctor Dick poured some medicine between the white lips.

As he did so a groan from another quarter startled him, and glancing in the direction from whence it came he saw the form of the young passenger, who had been riding on the box, quiver slightly.

In an instant he sprung to the side of the other sufferer, and bent over him, placing his hand upon his pulse.

"The bullet struck him in the forehead, glancing along the skull and coming out, I see, at the back of the head."

"It remains to see whether the bone is fractured—ah! here they come," and up dashed Landlord Larry and those who had kept up with him.

"How goes it, doctor?"

"Dave is beyond hope, I fear, while this gentleman is alive, though I do not know yet how seriously wounded."

"That man in rough clothes there is dead, as you can see at a glance; but come, we will get the wounded men into the stage at once, and I will drive on to the camps."

"And the road-agents?"

"By all means send a party to hunt them down," was the stern rejoinder.

CHAPTER XI.

DEATH AND MADNESS.

ALL knew that Doctor Dick was a skillful driver, and that he would take the coach into Last Chance sooner than any one else could, so they hastened to get the team ready.

The harness on the horse, which had been the dumb messenger to make known the tragedy, had been brought back, and two of the miners' horses were quickly put in as wheelers, while the wounded driver and passenger were tenderly lifted into the coach.

In got a couple of miners to support them in their arms, while the body of the man killed by the road-agents was put upon the top of the coach.

Landlord Larry had himself led the party in search of the trail of the road-agent, while, mounting the box, and leaving his horse to follow on behind, Doctor Dick sent the team along at a slapping pace for Last Chance Claim.

As they went along they met other miners coming out to the scene, but these were turned back, as there was no need of their going, and Landlord Larry had with him all that was needed.

It was just nightfall when the coach rolled by the door of the hotel, while, to the surprise of all, Doctor Dick did not draw rein there.

Instead he went on to his own cabin and came to a halt, while he said to the miners who accompanied him:

"If the lives of these two men are to be saved, it will only be by skill and devoted nursing, and I want them near me.

"Bring over two cots from the hotel, and we will soon make them as comfortable as possible."

The two cots were soon brought, the wounded men tenderly lifted out, and the coach driven to the stables by a miner, while Doctor Dick set to work to see just what he could do for his patients.

All knew that Driver Dave Dockery was a great favorite of the gambler doctor and the remark was made:

"He'll save Dave if it can be done, and he's the man to do it."

Left alone with his patients, save his Chinese assistant, Doctor Dick threw off his coat and set to work in earnest to see what he could do for them, and how seriously they were wounded.

He first went to Dave Dockery.

The driver lay as quiet as though asleep.

Placing his hand upon his heart, and then his ear close to his breast, Doctor Dick said calmly:

"It is the sleep of death."

With only a moment of thought, he straightened out the limbs, closed the eyes, folded the once strong, bronzed hands over the broad breast, and throwing a blanket over the form, said to his Chinese servant, speaking in the Chinese tongue, and speaking it well:

"Loo Foo, my friend is dead."

The Chinaman replied in his idea of English, not in his own tongue:

"Allee lightee, dockee, him wellee happy now allee samee 'Melican man angel."

Loo Foo had been converted, it was said, when he carried on the business of washee-washee in a mining-camp, for, as he had expressed it:

"More lovee 'Melican man Joss, gettee more washee."

Going from the body of Dave Dockery, Doctor Dick bent over the form of the wounded stranger.

He found him lying in a state of coma, breathing heavily and apparently very badly wounded.

Examining the wound Doctor Dick saw that the bullet had glanced on the forehead, as has been said, run along under the scalp to the back of the skull and there cut its way out.

Dressing the wound carefully, and using restoratives, the doctor soon had the satisfaction of discovering that his patient was rallying; and within an hour's time his eyes opened, and he looked about him in a bewildered way.

Passing his hand slowly over his face, he seemed trying to get his scattered thoughts, for he muttered something to himself and then suddenly burst into a violent fit of laughter.

"Great God! he will live but as a madman," cried Doctor Dick, moved by the sight of the strong man's brain having been crazed by the wound he had received.

Having made him as comfortable as possible he left Loo Foo on watch and went over to the saloon to report the result.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXPLANATION DEMANDED.

WHEN Doctor Dick reached the saloon, where one-half the miners of Last Chance were wont to congregate at night, he found it more crowded than usual.

Many had assembled there who did not generally frequent the place, preferring the quiet of their own cabins in the evening after a hard day's work.

These were brought there now by the happenings of the day, and the tragedy was being discussed in all its details, with the possibilities of the recovery of the driver and the young passenger, and the capture of the bold outlaws.

The fact that Dave Dockery had hinted in his note to Landlord Larry that he could pos-

sibly tell who the masked road-agent was, was a cause of considerable excitement to all, for it would doubtless fall on one in Last Chance to be the accused.

A hush fell upon the crowd as Doctor Dick entered, and the few who were gambling, for there were but a few that night, left their cards on the table to hear what would be said.

"Pards," said the doctor, in his courtly way, "I am just from my cabin, where I have left one of the wounded men dead, the other a madman."

A breathless silence followed these words, and then a voice broke it with:

"Doc, who is the dead man?"

"Dave Dockery."

A low murmur of regret and sorrow passed over the crowd, and the doctor added:

"He died soon after reaching the cabin."

"And t'other, doc?"

"The bullet struck him in the head, slightly fracturing the bone, I fear, yet indenting it and causing a loss of reason, which I fear may never return to him."

"Poor fellow! better be dead, like poor Dave," said one, and this view was the thought of all.

"Pards, prepare for Dave's funeral to-morrow, and out of respect for him, let us close the saloon to-night, for I know Landlord Larry would wish it so."

A general murmur of assent followed, and the doctor continued:

"I wish two men as couriers at once, one to carry a note to Landlord Larry, for he can go to the scene of the hold-up, and start on the trail from there as soon as it is light enough to see."

"I'll go, Doc," said a cheery voice and a young man came forward.

"Thank you, Wall, go with me to my cabin and I'll give you the note."

"Now, I wish a man to go as courier to Fort Faraway, and remember it is a dangerous and long ride."

"I hain't afeered of the danger, or the ride, Doc, so I'm yer man," said a burly fellow coming forward, and his words were greeted with a cheer.

Doctor Dick glanced at him and then said very calmly:

"Thank you, Brassy, but I do not care to accept your services."

"And just why?"

"In the first place I desire to send a letter to Buffalo Bill, and you have expressed openly your hatred for him, and to some day even up on him for not allowing you to have your way in certain matters."

"I doesn't allow my hates to interfere with duty."

"I do not care to accept your services, Brassy."

"Now, I asks a reason why?"

"I have given you one."

"I wants another."

"Is this a demand?"

"It be."

"You shall have it."

"Then don't beat round the bush but have the narve to come out with it like a man."

All looked at Brassy with amazement.

He had been drinking and evidently was just full enough to be reckless and want trouble.

The doctor smiled but answered complacently:

"I always answer a demand, Brassy, so will tell you frankly, that I would not trust you with any message whatever."

The words fell pat from the lips of the doctor, and there was no misunderstanding them, and Brassy did not, for with a yell he shouted:

"Yer shall eat them insultin' words, Doctor Dick!" and quick as action could be, he had drawn his revolver and fired.

The crowd had fallen back from about each man at Brassy's cry, and yet one man caught the bullet intended for the doctor in his shoulder.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RETURN SHOT.

It was not a second after the shot of Brassy before the doctor's weapon rung out. He had not expected Brassy to open fire

so quickly, so was not prepared for defense; but he was just so little behind him in time, that before the man could pull trigger a second time, he fired, and his bullet went straight where aimed, between the eyes of the one he intended to kill, when he dropped his hand upon his revolver.

Brassy's pistol fired a second shot as he fell, but it was from the death clutch upon the trigger, and the bullet went over the heads of the crowd, while instantly was heard the doctor's quiet tones:

"Come, men, who volunteers as courier to Faraway?"

A young man stepped promptly forward and answered:

"I was a soldier at Faraway, sir, and know the trail."

"I will go."

"You are the very man, Harding; come with Wall to my cabin."

"Good-night, gentlemen, and remember, I pay the expenses of Brassy's funeral, so do not be mean in his burial outfit."

With this Doctor Dick raised his sombrero and left the saloon, his admirers being still more impressed with his nerve and bearing after what had occurred.

The body of Brassy was removed to his cabin by those who were his friends, and all could not but agree that he had brought his sudden fate upon himself, as the first reason given, of his hatred to Buffalo Bill, was excuse enough for refusing him as a courier.

The saloon was closed, and the other gambling and drinking places followed the example set and also closed their doors for the night, so that quiet soon rested in the mining-camps of Last Chance.

In the mean while Doctor Dick, accompanied by Wall and Harding, had gone to his quarters, where Loo Foo was found making a cup of tea, alone with the dead and wounded, and seemingly unmindful of the fact.

Entering the cabin the doctor drew the blanket back from the form of poor Dave Dockery and revealed to the two couriers the honest, brave face of the driver.

"Poor Dave!"

"He is on his last trail now," he said softly, and seating himself at his table he hastily wrote two letters:

One read:

"DEAR LARRY:—

"Dave died soon after reaching my cabin."

"If you do not find trace of the outlaws by sunset, it would be well to return, sooner, if you can get no clue whatever."

"I send Harding to Fort Faraway, with a note to Buffalo Bill, as I promised to do, if there was another hold-up on the Overland Trail."

"I had to kill Brassy to-night, but Ball will explain the circumstances."

"Get back to poor Dave's funeral at sunset to-morrow, if possible."

"I closed saloon to-night out of respect to Dave."

"The young passenger will be a madman if he recovers."

"Yours,

"DOCTOR DICK."

The note to Buffalo Bill told of the hold-up on the stage trail, the death of one passenger, wounding of another and killing of Dave Dockery, and closed with:

"Landlord Larry is on the trail of the outlaws, and all will be done to hunt them down that it is possible to do."

"I will drive the coach back on the run, and until another driver can be found."

"If you cannot come now, state what you think best to be done and it will be attended to."

"Yours,

"DOCTOR DICK."

The couriers left as soon as the letters were received, and having seen them depart, Doctor Dick went over to the hotel to get his supper, which Loo Foo had ordered for him, after which he returned, looked at his patient, gave him a dose of medicine, and throwing himself upon his bed was soon fast asleep, wholly oblivious it seemed of the dead man and the sufferer within a few feet of him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STRANGE BURIAL.

THE courier on the trail of Landlord Larry, found him and his half-hundred miners, trailing the mountains and valleys over in search of some trace of the coming of the road-agents to the scene of the tragedy, and their going therefrom.

But the search of the evening before, and up to the arrival of Wall at noon, when they had gone into camp, had been wholly in vain.

Not a hoof-track could be found of the road-agents' horses, nor a place where they had lain in wait until the stage came along.

Landlord Larry was not one to waste energy upon impossibilities, and after reading Doctor Dick's letter he decided to return with his men to Last Chance.

They set out soon after the midday rest, and arrived in Last Chance just as all was in readiness for the burial of Dave Dockery and Brassy, for a double funeral was to be had.

The landlord dismissed his men and went at once to the quarters of Doctor Dick, who greeted him warmly and asked:

"Any success?"

"Not a bit."

"Too bad."

"We could not find the photograph of a trail, and to search longer was a waste of time, so as the men wished to go to Dave's funeral, I just came in."

"It was about all you could do under the circumstances, Larry."

"I see that they have got the corpse you furnished rigged out for burial too."

"Brassy?"

"Yes."

"Why not, for he has a number of friends?"

"Don't fear no trouble, do yer?"

"No, I think not, for Brassy prescribed for himself and I administered the medicine."

"Served him right for playing with edged tools."

"I will not say that, poor fellow, for life was dear to him; but he should have been more careful."

"We will go together to the burial."

"By all means, and I'll give my friends a hint to be ready if Brassy's pards go to showing an ugly mood, while you will go prepared, Doc?"

"I always am," was the laconic response.

"Now, how's yer sick man?"

"He will recover bodily, but never mentally I fear."

"I'm sorry," and Landlord Larry went to prepare for the burial.

In half an hour all was ready to start, and Doctor Dick and Landlord Larry were given the places of honor at the procession, or rather just following what was called "The Band," and which consisted of a dozen men who *sung* the music, the leader alone playing on a cornet.

At the command of the doctor, who was the master of ceremonies, the procession moved off to the music of

"I would not live away,"

really beautifully rendered, for there were some splendid voices in the band, and the cornet leader was a master of the instrument.

Following the doctor and Landlord Larry, came the eight men bearing the body of Dick Dockery, borne on a litter on their shoulders.

The body was incased in a board coffin, and behind followed eight men likewise carrying the body of Brassy.

Following were the miners, marching eight abreast and in solid column, nearly a thousand men being in line, and among them were led the horses which Dick Dockery was wont to drive, his belt of arms, hat and whips being carried on top of his coffin.

Up the canyon to the cemetery beneath the cliffs, filed the column at funeral pace, keeping time to the splendid voices, that changed from air to air as they marched along, and which echoed and re-echoed among the hills.

The burying-ground was reached, the bodies placed by the side of the graves dug for them, and Landlord Larry consigned them to their last resting-place by repeating the words of the burial service over them, no partiality being shown.

But when the coffin, with the weapons, hat and whip of Dave Dockery was lowered into the grave, hundreds of bold, brawny men stepped forward and threw in upon it bunches of wild flowers they had gathered, and when filled up, the little mound was covered from view by these sweet offerings of manly regard for the dead driver, while in strange contrast was the barren grave of Brassy, for his immediate friends had not thought of gathering flowers, there being no sentiment in his death.

Doctor Dick looked calmly on, and perhaps it was his stern, fearless mien that stayed the trouble that several of Brassy's pards seemed to have decided upon there in the sacred resting-place of the dead, perhaps the belief that they would be quickly sent to join their comrade, for they created no disturbance, only with a significant glance at the Gold-King Gambler turned and walked away with the bearing of men who would bide their time to avenge.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COURIER.

THE man who had volunteered to take the long and dangerous ride to Fort Faraway, to carry a letter to Buffalo Bill, had ridden along steadily after leaving Last Chance, until a couple of hours before day.

Then he halted, staked his horse out, and wrapping himself in his blanket, went to sleep.

For several hours he slept serenely, then awaking he cooked his breakfast and was soon again in the saddle.

He seemed to understand frontier craft perfectly, and to appreciate just what his horse could stand, so did not press him too hard.

Camping at nightfall, he was again on the trail at daybreak, and held steadily on during the day.

Another night camp and he rode into Fort Faraway the next morning before the hour of noon.

He was directed at once to the quarters of Buffalo Bill, and though, having been a soldier there, he recognized many old friends, he saw that, dressed as he then was, and with his beard grown out, the recognition was not mutual.

But the moment he entered the presence of Buffalo Bill he was recognized and warmly greeted, for the scout had always liked the young soldier, who had been given his discharge on account of a severe wound received in an Indian fight, which it was thought would render him lame for life.

"Well, Harding, I am glad to see you, and you deserve credit for the plucky ride you have made."

"How is the old wound getting on now?"

"All right, Bill, for I am not at all lame. I am glad to say."

"And you are getting rich, I suppose?"

"Well, no, but I have laid up some money in mining, only I cannot stand upon my wounded leg long at a time, and so I am going to ask you to take me on as a scout under your command, if you can do so."

"Harding, you are just the man I want, and you are in that very place where I need you, so you can return to your mine, and pretend to work as before, for there is where I wish you to serve me, since I received this letter from Doctor Dick."

"Thank you, Pard Cody, for your kindness, and will be glad to do as you wish; but may I ask a favor?"

"Certainly."

"It is that no one knows that I am in your service, not even Landlord Larry or Doctor Dick, for I can work better I am sure."

"It might be a good idea to have it so, and it shall be as you wish, for you can do better work as a spy, and I have full confidence in you, Harding."

"But we will talk over just what it is best to do, when I have reported to Major Randall the holding up of the coach, and killing of Dave Dockery and the others."

Buffalo Bill then left the courier and went to headquarters, where he held a long conversation with the commandant of the post.

Returning to his own quarters he said to Harding, who was awaiting him:

"Well, pard, the major has heard the whole story, and he has left it to me to go in my own way about running down these road-agents, for, though but one was seen there were evidently more at the hold-up."

"I do not doubt that, for one man would be a bold one to alone make an open attempt to hold-up a coach with Dave Dockery on the box, and knowing that he had passengers with him."

"Well, Harding, you are to return to Last Chance, and give letters I will write to Landlord Larry, and I wish you to go to work in my service, and secret service it must be, for what you do must be underhand, as you said, no one knowing that you are doing else than carrying on your mining as before."

"I will give you a paper which will protect you, for Major Randall will indorse it officially, and you can use it in case of trouble, or necessity, not otherwise."

"I thank you, friend Bill, and I'll be discreet, I promise you; but now there is another thing I wish to tell you, and to ask what you think of it."

"Well, what is it, Harding?"

"Do you believe that Sergeant Wallace Weston is dead?" was the query, in a low, earnest tone.

CHAPTER XVI.

HARDING'S SECRET.

BUFFALO BILL fairly started at the unexpected secret asked him by Hal Harding, the miner, and gazing intently at him, asked:

"Why do you ask such a question, Harding?"

"I will tell you when you answer my question, Mr. Cody."

"Whether I believe Sergeant Wallace Weston dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"I do."

"You have good reason for believing it, then?"

"I have."

"Please tell me what it is."

"As you have some motive above curiosity in asking, I will do so, Harding," and Buffalo Bill told the whole story of Sergeant Weston's escape from execution, and the finding of a body in his uniform upon the desert, and burying it.

But he added:

"I confess, Harding, after a talk with Doctor Dick upon the subject, I was led to doubt to a certain degree the death of the sergeant, and even followed a trail which I supposed was his."

"With what result, sir?"

"That we found the trail led to a mine which had caved in and crushed the cabin home of those who dwelt there!"

"When was this, sir?"

"But a short while ago."

"Do you mind giving me the date?"

Buffalo Bill took a note-book from his pocket and gave the exact date.

"Now, Harding, you have some knowledge upon this subject, a secret to tell."

"Yes, sir."

"Out with it."

"You will keep it in confidence, between us two?"

"Certainly."

"You know that the sergeant was my friend, that he had saved my life twice in battle, and I loved him as I did a brother?"

"I remember."

"No man knew him better than I did in the fort, for we were boon comrades for over a year, and I knew his features perfectly, and more, other marks of identification about him."

"Yes."

"The sergeant had one mark that he was sensitive about, and kept hidden from all, though I saw it several times."

"What was it?"

"He had a peculiar way of dressing his hair, with a curl hanging over his forehead."

"I remember it."

"Beneath that curl, sir, was a birth-mark."

"Ah!"

"It was a peculiar one that was a red cross, an inch in length upon his forehead, and perfect in shape."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and I saw that same mark on a man's forehead a few days before the date you say that Sergeant Weston, if it was he, was buried in the cave-in mine."

"Ah! and where did you see it?"

"I had gone to Wingate by coach, sir, to collect some money due me from several soldiers there, and in the sutler's store I saw a man whose face I was sure I had seen before."

"He wore his hair and beard long, and seemed to stoop badly, or was round shouldered; but the form otherwise was the same, so were the eyes and shape of the head, with a round gold setting the size of a pin's head, in one of the front teeth."

"Reading a letter that seemed to impress him he took off his hat and pushed his hair back, and I saw the red cross mark on his forehead."

"I went up to see him as though to attract his attention, but he looked at me as though he had never seen me before, yet his face flushed and paled as he looked."

"Now, Mr. Cody, that man was none other than Sergeant Weston, and I'll swear to it, but I would not tell other man than you, for if he escaped death no one is more glad of it than I, unless—"

"Unless what, Harding?"

"Unless, a poor man, and a hunted one, he turned road-agent and was the man who held up the coach, killing Dave Dockery."

"No, Harding, I can hardly believe that of him, and then too the coach was just held up, and this man, with his pard, perished in the cave-in of their mine."

"You are sure?"

"I cannot see reason to doubt it: but now that you tell me what you do, the man who saved me from the gang of Headlight Joe, and then went on his way, recalled a face I could not place, and now I am sure that it was Sergeant Weston; but he too had round shoulders, while the sergeant did not have, and yet he was then on his way to Wingate, and it was upon his return that I followed his trail."

"Well, sir, if it was in my power to capture Sergeant Weston, never would I lay hand upon him, and I believe you feel the same way, unless it was your orders to do so."

"Still, somehow the thought came to me that, a fugitive, and friendless, he might have turned outlaw."

"I do not think so, and I am sure now that, if it was Weston who came to my aid, and whom you saw, that he perished in the mine; but now let us go over what I wish you to do, and my plan to run down these road-agents, who I am sure are from Last Chance Claim and nowhere else," said Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RETURN OF THE COURIER.

A PALE seemed to have fallen over Last Chance, in the death of Dave Dockery, and its life began to flag in gloom.

Seeing this, and fearing that the hold-up of the coach might injure the mines, Landlord Larry decided to get up a scheme to attract outsiders to the mines, and so the rumor went out of a large find of gold in one of the canyons near the town.

A couple of miners only were put there to work it, and the claim was known as the "Doctor Dick Mine," as the Gold King at once bought from the landlord a half interest in it.

This news stirred the miners to increased exertions in their own mines, and also caused prospectors to go out on the search for new "finds."

The wounded passenger continued to steadily improve bodily, under the skill and kind care of Doctor Dick, but mentally his mind was a wreck, and no one believed that he would ever regain his reason.

Doctor Dick hinted at an operation some day that might relieve the pressure upon the brain, yet spoke of it also as an experiment and a dangerous one, only to be tried as a last resort.

The passenger was as docile as a child, gave no trouble, and simply sat about whittling sticks into the shape of a revolver, his only occupation.

At last the week passed by, when the

stage was to start again upon its run eastward.

A number of miners had volunteered as an escort, but Doctor Dick said he would drive on the run out and come back as a passenger, and he did not expect trouble so would not accept an armed escort.

The night before the stage was to start, Harding, the courier to Fort Faraway, returned.

He brought with him a letter from Buffalo Bill to Doctor Dick, and another for Landlord Larry, stating that the troops at the fort were pressed just then with extra duty, as the Indians were in an angry mood, and for them to do what they could for the protection of the coaches until Major Randall could investigate and patrol the trail.

Harding had little to say of his visit to the fort, more than to hint that the soldiers were too much occupied just then with their own affairs to care much for the killing of a stage-driver and couple of passengers.

As no Government funds had been taken by the outlaws, the miners would have to look to their own protection, for awhile at least.

The courier also stated that there were stories at the fort of secret finds of gold in and about Last Chance, and he would give up his intention, expressed some time before, of selling out his mining interests, and instead, stick to hard work, in the hope of striking it rich in the end.

The next morning the coach was to start, and as it was to go out at an early hour many of the miners decided to remain up all night gambling to see it leave, for it would be the Sabbath Day when they could rest.

Doctor Dick had been too busy of late with his patient and other matters, to devote much time to gambling, and so he also decided to make a night of it at the gambling-tables.

Where the dawn came many regretted that he had done so, for never had he played more recklessly, and never before had he been such a large winner, for luck seemed to go his way from the start.

Play what game he might he was a winner, and going from table to table he "broke the combination" as one of the miners expressed it.

The dawn was at hand when he went to his cabin for a bath, and in half an hour he came back to the hotel for breakfast, looking little like a man who had passed the night over a gambling table.

He was dressed in his best, was well armed, and coming out from a hearty breakfast lighted a cigar and mounted to the stage-box at a single bound, an act that gained for him a cheer upon his agility.

"All ready, Landlord Larry," he called out as he gathered up the reins, and the answer was:

"No passengers, mails aboard, go!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOCTOR DICK'S DRIVE.

DOCTOR DICK gathered up the reins in a way that showed him a master of the art of driving.

He looked very dashing and handsome, as he sat on the box, his long hair falling upon his shoulders and his face devoid of all dread of what he might have to encounter upon his run.

He puffed the blue smoke of his cigar in rings above his head, and with a wave of the hand at the word, "Go," gave his whip-lash a quick whirl and made the crack resound like a pistol-shot.

The six horses bounded forward and a wild yell of admiration of the volunteer driver's pluck went up from the crowd.

As the coach rolled down the valley the miners came out from their cabins and gave him a cheer, and it was a constant, continuous yell along the line until he had left the last camp behind him.

The six fine horses had been sent along at a rapid pace until the camps were left behind, the doctor showing his great skill as a driver in dashing over places, and around corners where others had found it safer to go slow, but when the last cabin disappeared the team was brought down to a jog, for the way was long before them.

The scene of the last tragedy was passed at a walk, the doctor glancing calmly at the spot where Dave Dockery had lost his life, along with his passengers.

The first relay was made, and the stock-tender there, who had heard the news of the hold-up from Landlord Larry's men when searching for the road-agents, expressed pleasure at seeing the coach come in safe and with Doctor Dick upon the box.

"Anything suspicious about, pard?" asked the doctor.

"No, sir, hain't seen a man around since poor Dave went by on the last run, which was his last run on earth."

"Yes, poor fellow, he is gone."

"You doesn't mean ter say that yer is going ter drive ther run, Doc?"

"Only on this trip, pard, for I have other work to do; but there was no one at Last Chance to take the coach out, so I volunteered."

"And you has the nerve ter run through, while yer handles ther ribbons as though yer was born on a stage box."

"But yer'll find drivers scarce at t'other end, Doctor Dick, or I'm greatly mistook."

"I hope not," and the fresh team being ready, the doctor pushed on once more.

The second relay-station was reached at noon, and here Doctor Dick had his dinner.

He had come over the worst part of the road, as far as the railway and danger from attack was concerned, but had fifty miles yet before him, where a halt was always made for the night, as there was a canyon there to go through which could only be driven in daylight, and the relay of horses taken in the morning had to pull on into the station at the end of the run for the driver on the Last Chance end of the line.

But the doctor reached what was known as Canyon End Station soon after dark, and after supper turned in in one of the cots in the cabin provided for passengers, and was soon fast asleep.

He was up at an early hour, had breakfast, lighted his cigar, and with a spanking fine team took the perilous run through the canyon at a trot, driving the twenty miles that ended his run in a little over three hours.

The stage rolling in at a brisk pace to the station at W—, was greeted with cheers, for the news had come from Fort Faraway the day before of Dave Dockery's death, the killing of one passenger, wounding of another, and the robbery of the coach.

The brave man who had dared drive through was greeted with cheers, but he had hardly dismounted from the box when he was informed that he would have to drive back, as there was no driver there who would take the risk at any price.

Other drivers had been sent for, men who were afraid of nothing, but no one had yet been found who would drive the run to Last Chance, which had been set down in the frontier vocabulary as the "Sure Death Trail."

CHAPTER XIX.

IN DREAD SUSPENSE.

DOCTOR DICK found it as had been said, that there was no driver at W— willing to take the coach back to Last Chance and return without an escort, and this could not be furnished.

So he agreed to drive the coach back on condition that the driver who came to take charge should come on to Last Chance on horseback and be ready to come back with it.

He had shown that he did not fear the drive, but his business and professional duties demanded that he should be at Last Chance, and there he must remain.

He was secretly told by the agent that there was a valuable mail to go through in registered letters, and asked if he dared risk carrying them.

"By all means, sir, for I am driving to do my full duty," was the answer.

So the mail was made up, and at the last moment two passengers applied for seats.

They were strangers in W— but said they were going to Last Chance to work in the mines, and they were accordingly given seats upon the box, as they preferred to ride outside.

Then the coach started on its return to Last Chance with Doctor Dick still holding the reins.

Having driven over the run once, and knowing what his relay teams could do, he started out to make the regular time on the run.

But there was alarm felt at Last Chance when half an hour had passed over schedule time and the coach did not put in an appearance, and nothing was seen of it on the three miles of trail visible down the valley.

When an hour passed the anxiety became great, for all conjectured that Doctor Dick had met the fate of Bud Benton and Dave Dockery.

Some said that the delay was because the doctor was new on the road, and this appeared to be a solution of the coach not coming in.

But Landlord Larry grew more and more anxious, and at last decided to go out with a party on a search for the delayed coach.

But, just as the men were told to get their horses, a shout arose down the valley that the coach was seen approaching, and soon after a cloud of dust was visible drifting along the stage trail.

A shout arose, for it showed that at least some one was there, whatever had happened, to drive the coach in.

Then those who had said the delay was caused by the doctor being new to the trail began to crow, but only for a while, as Landlord Larry, who was gazing through a field glass at the approaching stage, called out:

"There are but four horses—two are missing for some reason."

It was now all conjecture as to the cause of delay, with every one in the dark as to the real cause.

Again Landlord Larry had something to say, and it was to the effect that the coach was not dashing along with its accustomed speed in coming in at the end of the trail, that Doctor Dick was on the box, and alone, while he seemed to drive in a very careful manner, very different from his going away on his drive out.

Nearer and nearer came the coach up the valley, every eye upon it, and all wondering, guessing and asserting their views of what had happened.

"The doctor is there, that is certain," said one.

"Two horses have been killed," another remarked.

"He may have lost them in the bad roads," was an answer.

"Perhaps they were shot down by road-agents."

"He has no passengers."

"See how he drives."

"He comes on as slow as a snail."

"See, he is driving with one hand."

"What does that mean?"

"His left hand is hanging by his side."

"He has surely been wounded."

And so the comments ran around, as all stood watching the coming coach, which half an hour after coming in sight rolled up to the hotel, came to a halt and was greeted with a wild chorus of cheers from the assembled miners.

CHAPTER XX.

DOCTOR DICK RUNS THE GANTLET.

THE crowd that gazed at Doctor Dick as he came up saw that his handsome face was very pale, his eyes had a haggard look and his teeth were firmly set.

They knew that he had passed through some dread ordeal, and a silence fell upon all, awaiting for him to speak.

They saw that his left arm was carried in a sling, his handkerchief knotted around his neck, and that a red stain was upon his sleeve.

Furthermore they saw that the two wheel-horses were missing, the center pair having been put back in their place.

Upon opening the stage door to see if there were any passengers, Landlord Larry started back as the dead form of a man pitched out on his head.

The door being open it was seen that a second form was in the coach, all in a heap in one corner.

There were red stains upon the steps, and

upon the leather cushions, and everything indicated that the stage had run a death-gantlet.

But, excepting for his pale, stern face the doctor was as serene as a May morn, though his voice showed weakness when he spoke.

"I'll ask your aid, landlord, for I am weakened from loss of blood."

"Bind my arm up to stop the flow and I'll see how serious the wound is."

He said no more, but was at once aided from the box and over to his cabin, Landlord Larry leaving his clerk to look after the mails and the dead passengers.

Arriving at the cabin Doctor Dick had his coat sleeve slit open and the bandage he had tied about his arm removed.

His silk shirt sleeve was also cut, and then the wound was revealed in the fleshly part of the arm.

Taking a probe from his case Doctor Dick, after swallowing a glass of brandy, coolly probed the wound, found the ball, and aided by Loo Foo, the Chinese, under his direction, soon extracted the bullet.

Then the wound was skillfully dressed, the arm rested in a sling, and Doctor Dick lolling back in his easy-chair asked with the greatest sangfroid:

"Well, Landlord Larry, how goes all at Last Chance?"

The landlord was amazed at the coolness of the man, and said quickly:

"Oh, Last Chance is O. K.; but it is your run that we are dying to hear about, Doc."

"Well, it was a close call for me, Larry, I admit, for I found foes where I expected friends."

"You were held up?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At what you have very appropriately named the Dead Line, Larry."

"The place where Bud and Dave were killed?"

"Yes."

"It was the masked road-agents?"

"Not this time."

"Ah! who then?"

"I did not form their acquaintance by name, but perhaps a search of the bodies may reveal."

"You killed them?"

"Two."

"Where are the bodies?"

"I brought them along in the coach."

"I thought they were passengers who had been killed?"

"They were."

"How do you mean?"

"They left W— booked as passengers, but reached Last Chance as dead-head road-agents."

"Now I begin to understand."

"It was your two passengers who attacked you?"

"Just so."

"It is a wonder that they did not kill you."

"They would easily have done so, had I not suspected them; but I grew suspicious, and without appearing to do so, watched their every look and move."

"When we drew near the Dead Line, they said they would lie down on top of the coach and rest, so they spread their blankets and did so."

"I thought this strange, as just before I had told them we were approaching the scene of the hold-ups."

"But I kept my eye upon them, and, as we neared the cliff the sun shone brightly down and I distinctly saw the shadows of the two men as they arose and drew their revolvers."

"I drew mine as quick as a flash, turned, and caught this shot in the arm while a second bullet whizzed by my head."

CHAPTER XXI.

A MAN'S NERVE.

THE doctor paused in his story, as though recalling the thrilling scene, which had so nearly cost him his life, and a sad look came into his eyes as though he felt that his mission seemed ever to kill.

So lost was he in thought, that Landlord Larry had to recall him to his story by saying:

"It was a very close call for you, Doc."

"A close call indeed, and, but for the shadows on the cliff, revealing the hostility of my two passengers, my death would have followed."

"But, my discovery of their intention, and quickness in facing them, disconcerted them both, destroying their aim, close as they were to me."

"They did not fire again?"

"Oh, yes; several shots, two of which killed my wheelers; but I got in my work by firing two shots, also."

"Killing them?"

"Yes, for you will find my bullet-brands in their foreheads."

"The horses had started forward at the shots, and as the wheelers fell, the coach gave a lurch which sent the two men from the top to the ground just as I fired on them."

"I quieted my team, and first bound my arm up as tightly as I could to stop the flow of blood, and then dismounting, picked up the two dead men, threw them into the coach and drove on."

"Of course my wounded arm gave me more and more trouble, and I could not drive but very slowly with one hand, and hence my delay in arrival."

"But I got in without being robbed, which I am very glad of, for there is a large registered mail on this run."

"Now I will have Loo Foo fetch me some supper and retire, for I am about played out, and you can search the two men and let me know the result in the morning."

"But one minute—how is my patient?"

"Bodily all right, but his mind, as you said would be the case, is gone."

"Poor fellow! Good-night, Larry, and hurry Loo Foo over with my supper, please."

Landlord Larry bade Doctor Dick good-night and departed, more than ever impressed with the idea that the Gold King Gambler was a very remarkable man.

Going to his hotel Landlord Larry found nearly every denizen of Last Chance awaiting him, and a suppressed excitement was apparent in all.

The two bodies had been taken into the hotel office, to await the coming of the landlord, and there they lay covered with a blanket.

The moment Landlord Larry was seen, coming from the cabin of Doctor Dick, cries arose of:

"Speech! speech!"

"Tell the news, landlord!" and so on.

Larry mounted to the piazza of the hotel and in a few words told the story of Doctor Dick's running the gantlet and the nerve he had shown in the ordeal he had passed through.

"Oh, he's got ther narve of Old Nick, as we all knows," cried a miner, and this intended compliment was acquiesced in by one and all.

Having learned the news the miners adjourned to the saloons and the toasts for the next few hours were to:

"Doctor Dick, a man o' narve from Way back."

Until a late hour the miners drank and gambled, and then, toward dawn, quiet reigned in the camps, broken only now and then by a yell from some man who was too full of liquor to go to sleep.

The next morning, greatly to the delight of all, Doctor Dick appeared at breakfast and received an ovation.

Loo Foo had dressed his wounded arm, and though sore, it was all right, Doctor Dick said, yet he was pale from loss of blood.

After breakfast he mounted his horse and took the rounds to see his patients, and everywhere he was greeted with a welcome that could not but flatter him.

But the two weeks before date of the return of the coach, for the runs were semi-monthly, passed away and no driver appeared from W— to carry the stage out, so it began to look very much as though Doctor Dick would have to again take the reins.

The search of the dead bodies of the two road-agents had revealed nothing as to their identity, for excepting their weapons, a little money, some odds and ends in their pockets they had nothing of value, or identification about them, and they were buried at the ex-

pense of Doctor Dick, who would have it so, as he very laconically remarked:

"As I killed them, I should pay their expenses when they are unable to do so."

At last the day for the starting of the coach came round, and Doctor Dick, as no one else volunteered, expressed his willingness to take the reins, though he remarked:

"This shall be the last run I shall make, so you must get a man here, Landlord Larry, to go, if I do not bring one back with me from W—."

And once more Doctor Dick rolled away with a cheer from his admirers.

CHAPTER XXII.

A VOLUNTEER.

DOCTOR DICK had an uneventful run of it on the way to W— and arrived without accident or delay on time at the end of his journey.

He was well received, but the stage-agent at W— told him that not a volunteer had put in an appearance for the place of driver.

Double the price had been offered, but there were no takers, and the agent added:

"You must find some dare-devil at Last Chance who is willing to risk his life upon the box, while rest assured, Doctor Dick, I have reported your noble service for the company in its dire need and it will be appreciated."

"I do not care for pay, or thanks, only I wish to be relieved of a duty I do not like, especially as it interferes with my own work," was the answer.

Just before the time came for the starting of the coach a horseman rode up and dismounted at the stage-office.

He was an odd-looking individual, tall, but with a hump on his back, awkward in gait, and dressed in buckskin leggings, hunting-shirt and a pair of boots.

His hair was long, very long, bushy, and would have been white but for its soiled appearance, and he had it cropped, or banged in front like an Indian, or fashionable young miss, to keep it out of his eyes.

His face was clean shaven, but the hue of leather, and he wore a pair of iron-rimmed spectacles.

His slouch hat was worn in reality, for the rim fell down upon his shoulders, save in front where the flap was turned up and fastened with an army button.

He was armed with a pair of old, but serviceable revolvers, an ugly-looking bowie-knife with a deer's horn handle, and a combined rifle and shot-gun, double-barreled.

Then his horse was as queer as his master in appearance, being a large, raw-boned animal, with patches of hair upon him, a long tangled mane and tail, and devoid of shoes, though his hoofs looked as tough as iron.

The saddle was also a back number, and the stake rope served for a bridle as well.

A lariat hung at the saddle-horn, also a hatchet, and in a large rubber blanket was rolled his bedding, while a bag contained a coffeepot, frying-pan, tin cup, plate and some provisions.

He looked the crowd over as he drew rein, and asked quietly:

"Who's boss o' this layout?"

"I am," and the stage-agent stepped forward.

"I hears thet yer wants a man ter drive yer old hearse on ther trail ter Last Chance and back."

"I do."

"I'm yer huckleberry."

"You."

"Yas, me."

"Are you a driver?"

"Ef I wasn't I'd not be sich a durned fool as ter trust myself on a two story hearse, pard."

"Who sent you here?"

"Nobody, for I hain't one ter be sent."

"Where did you come from?"

"Ther up-country, whar I has been trap-pin', huntin', prospectin' and killin' a Injin or two—see!"

"And now you wish to turn stage-driver?"

"If it pays what they told me at Fort Far-away I does."

"The pay is good; but have you no references?"

"Yas."

"Where are they?"

"Here."

The old man put his hands upon his revolvers and drew them with a lightning-like motion that surprised the lookers on.

"They are pretty good, references on a pinch, and you may have cause to use them if you drive this trail."

"I has used them before, and I guess I kin do it ag'in," was the quiet response.

"When could you begin?"

"Now."

"What is your name?"

"Old Huckleberry, but the boys calls me Old Huck for short; but durn ther name, call me what yer wants ter, and I'll be thar."

"Well, Pard Huckleberry, I rather like your style, and have a mind to give you a trial."

"Ef yer kin do better, don't do it; but if yer can't, count on me, for as I said afore, I'm yer Huckleberry, and ready for the game."

Doctor Dick had been closely looking at the old volunteer and said something in a whisper to the stage agent who at once said:

"I'll take you, and the time for starting is almost up."

"I'm ready, only take care of my horse at my expense," and the volunteer dismounted ready for work.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"OLD HUCKLEBERRY."

WHEN "Old Huckleberry" mounted the stage-box, Doctor Dick yielded to him the reins.

He seized them in a somewhat awkward manner, yet with the air of one who knew just what to do, took the whip, gave it a resounding crack and started off at a brisk pace.

There were four passengers inside, all miners going to Last Chance, lured there by the rumor of richer mines having been found, for the stories were circulating more and more that there were rich finds being discovered there every day.

"That man knows how to handle the reins as well as the best of them, old though he may be, and a trifle awkward," said the stage-agent, as he saw the volunteer driver sending his team along at a slapping pace, in spite of the fact that the trail was none of the best along there.

The coach soon disappeared from the sight of those at W—, made the night-halt on time, and as soon as he had had his supper the new driver wrapped himself in his blankets and threw himself down out doors, declining the invitation of the stock-tender to sleep in the cabin.

He was on his box on time the next morning, and with Doctor Dick by his side, went off on his run.

He was a man disposed to silence, for he did not speak often, unless Doctor Dick addressed him.

But he would ask now and then about the trails, and showed some interest in the gambler's stories of the different road-agents' attacks upon the way to Last Chance.

He greeted the stock-tenders at the relay stations pleasantly, said he hoped to be with them for some time, and kept the team at the pace set for schedule time.

Passing the scenes of the several tragedies, he drew rein for a few minutes and attentively regarded the surroundings, but drove on again without a word of comment.

Doctor Dick had become more and more interested in the strange driver, had told him all he could about the trail, and time to make going and coming, and was anxious to have him make no mistakes, he said.

He tried to draw him out time and again, but in vain.

All he could learn from him was that he had lived for many years upon the frontier and preferred to do so for reasons best known to himself.

He said he was trapper, Indian-fighter, hunter and prospector, that was all, and he tried to do his duty in every work he undertook.

More he would not say of himself, and the doctor gave up trying to "pump" him.

When the coach came in sight of Last Chance, Old Huckleberry showed no satisfac-

tion at having made the run in safety, or excitement at driving in for the first time.

He quickened the pace of his team, handled his reins with a skill that won the admiration, as he had all along, of Doctor Dick, and at last came to a halt before the hotel with a whoop and the words:

"Here we be, boss!"

Doctor Dick introduced Old Huckleberry from the box, as soon as the cheer that greeted their arrival had died away.

"Pards, I is glad ter know yer, and I greets yer," and with this Old Huckleberry dismounted from the box and asked at once for the "feed room."

He ate his supper with a relish, smoked his pipe, and declining a bed in the hotel, saying it would smother him to sleep in between walls, took an ax and hatchet, with a few nails, and going up on the hillside where there was a thicket, soon built for himself a wicky-up that would keep him sheltered even in a storm.

He carried his few traps there, and then stuck up a notice which read:

"OLD HUCKLEBERRY'S CLAIM."

Having completed his quarters, he strolled about among the saloons and gambling dens, watched the playing, but neither drank or gambled, and at last, tiring of looking on, went to his roost and turned in for the night, an object of curiosity to all, yet also of admiration, for a man who would volunteer to drive the coach over that trail was one to command respect in Last Chance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WAY IT WAS DONE.

THE new driver drove the run to W— for several round trips, and not once had he been held-up, or seen any sign of a road-agent on the way.

He made the regular time, drove without any accident whatever, attended to his business, associated with no one, or, that is, to be on intimate terms with any one, not even Doctor Dick, and still slept in his little shelter on the hill.

He had fitted this up more comfortably, and said that he felt perfectly at home there, while, on his return from W— he had led his horse back behind the coach, wishing to have him at Last Chance, where his stay was always two weeks, for there was only a day's stop at the other end of the run.

He was wont to go on long hunts, mounted upon "Rawbones," as he called his horse, and he kept Landlord Larry well supplied with game.

One day as Old Huckleberry was returning to Last Chance, and neared the Dead Line, the scene of the other hold-up, he suddenly threw his rifle to his shoulder and sent a shower of buckshot into a thicket ahead.

A rifle bullet from the other barrel was sent to the other side, and the whip was brought down upon his team in a way that put them into a run.

Seeing them well started he threw the reins over the brake and with a revolver in each hand opened a fusillade on both sides of the trail, while he called out to his passengers:

"Blaze away into the bushes, durn yer, for thar is game thar ter kill!"

All this had not taken over half a dozen seconds, and that there was "game" in the thickets, and dangerous game at that, was proven by hearing several loud cries of pain, and stern orders given, while men were seen hunting shelter from the unexpected fusillade opened upon them.

There were eight passengers in the coach, and urged by the old driver, several of them obeyed and opened fire from the windows.

The result was that where road-agents had been lying in wait for the coach, and were just about to show themselves and command a halt, they were taken completely by surprise and forced to seek shelter from the leaden messengers flying about them.

The rapid fire, the bold act, and all combined caused the road-agents to believe that there was a coach full of soldiers, that a trap was prepared for them, and ere they could rally and their leader could convince them that it was not so, the coach had gone by the Dead Line and was going along the pass at

the full speed of its horses, the reins now in the hands of Old Huck once more.

The passengers all saw the panic-stricken road-agents, half a dozen in number, and encouraged by the boldness of Old Huck, kept up a hot fire, which they felt confident had not been thrown away.

When pursuit was no longer feared, Old Huck drew his team down to a trot, and leaning over called out:

"We done 'em up thet time, pards."

The passengers cheered the old driver, and when he drew rein at the hotel in Last Chance they quickly made known his act of heroism, for, throwing the reins upon the backs of his horses he had gotten down from the box, reported the safe arrival of the coach to Landlord Larry and gone in to his supper.

When the story was told, of how bravely he had run the gantlet, Landlord Larry went in to have a talk with him, but found that he had finished his supper and gone.

It was a cold evening, and there was snow flying, so looking over to the hill where the little shanty of Old Huck was located, Landlord Larry saw a bright fire burning and at once went there.

There sat Old Huck enjoying his pipe and warming his feet before the fire in the clay chimney he had built.

He had a canvas covering the doorway, to keep out the cold and snow, and seemed as contented as could be in his lone quarters.

"Well, old man, you seem happy," he said.

"Why not?"

"You brought in a valuable freight tonight, in money and registered letters."

"I know it."

"Do you know how much?"

"Ther agent at W— told me he thought about forty thousand, and so I made a rush ter git through."

"And did it grandly."

"That's what I'm paid fer."

"I have heard the story of your running the gantlet and surprising the road-agents."

Old Huck laughed and replied:

"Waal, I calkilate as how they was astonished."

"You see I seen the tracks on the trail, foot-tracks, and fresh ones, goin' on toward the Dead Line, and so I kinder felt sart'in o' a hold-up."

"When I come to ther pass I seen ther top o' a small tree wavin' and knowed somebody were up in it looking over t'other trees."

"So I jist up with old Drop-'em, and I let drive with a handful o' bullets I had dropped into ther shot-gun barrel, and I put a piece o' lead on t'other side o' trail, dropped ther ribbons and set my two puppies ter barking, as soon as I hed laid ther silk onter ther team and got 'em inter a run."

"I tell yer, landlord, it were prime fun and no mistake, and as ther insiders helped with their guns, you bet we waltzed through them scared road-agents in a way that crippled 'em, and come in on time."

"That's all thar is of ther story, boss," and Old Huckleberry puffed away at his pipe again in the most unconcerned manner possible.

CHAPTER XXV.

OLD HUCK AS A TRAILER.

HARDLY had old Huckleberry finished his simple story of his brave act in saving his passengers, and the coach from robbery, when a voice at the door said:

"Ho, old gentleman, I have just heard at the hotel of your splendid work this afternoon and have come to congratulate you."

"Come in, Pard Doc, and camp on that blanket thar before ther fire."

"I is glad to see yer, but I don't need no congratulations, for I hain't done nothing more than I oughter."

"Well, old man, you saved the lives of your passengers, and a rich freight, I learn, and I know as well as any one how to appreciate what you did, for I have driven the trail, you remember."

"I know it, and done it well."

"I also praised Old Huck, Doc, but he does not care to be thanked; but what is to

be done about this attempted attack on the coach?" said Landlord Larry.

"I'll go out so as ter git thar at daybreak, and see if thar can be any trail found."

"It is spittin' now, but not much, and I guess we can find if we done any harm in our fire and maybe track the varmints," said Old Huck.

"And I'll go with you," said Landlord Larry.

"Count me another," the doctor added.

Then it was decided to take a dozen men along, and the doctor and the landlord bade the old driver good-night and departed, when he at once turned in, after throwing a large log upon his fire to burn until morning.

"That is a strange old character, Larry," said Doctor Dick as the two walked back to the hotel.

"He is indeed, Doc. I do not understand him, for he is a mystery to me."

"And to me; but do you think I should send another courier to Buffalo Bill making known this intended attack?"

"No, write as you did before to him, and we'll get it by way of W—."

"I'll do so; but did you learn anything in particular about this attack?"

"Nothing more than that fully half a dozen road-agents were seen, and but for the bold and prompt act of Old Huck there would have been death and robbery beyond a doubt."

"He is a very daring man to do what he did."

"He is indeed, and it will surely mark him for death with the road-agents."

"Beyond all doubt; but we must make a start early enough to bring us to the scene by daybreak, so good-night."

The two separated and yet met again when Old Huck came up ready mounted to take the trail.

The party who were to go were soon in the saddle and they started off at a canter.

There was just a trace of snow upon the ground, and they were glad to see that there was no more.

A brisk gallop brought them to the Dead Line at dawn, and the search was at once begun.

Hardly any snow had fallen there, and in the pinons there was none, so that in several places the ground was stained red, showing that the coach had not been useless if not fatal.

Then Old Huck showed his skill as a trailer, for he at once went to work in a way that revealed the fact that he was an old hand at the business.

He went from blood-stain to blood-stain in silence, examined the position of the thicket, took in the whole situation, and the direction of the stage when the firing had been going on, and at last started off up the canyon following a trail that was so faint that a number of the party said that there was no trail at all.

But he climbed up the steep side of the canyon end, followed by the others, and there on the top were found several red spots in different places.

"Three, maybe dead, maybe only wounded," he said shortly.

"Those three stains tell you that, old man?" asked Doctor Dick.

"Yas, they took off ther dead or wounded, as ther case might be, and halted ter rest after climbin' up here, and right here is whar they laid the dead or wounded down, while they was restin'."

"Well, which way now, Huck, for your solution seems the right one," said Doctor Dick.

"That's hard ter tell, for a horse wouldn't leave no track here," was the reply.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

THAT even Old Huckleberry had lost his grip on the trail, after reaching the top of the ridge, was soon evident, for, search as he might, he could find no trace of a track in the hard, rocky soil about them.

"We'll scatter, pards, and try ter find another place whar they has rested ther loads, for they won't carry heavy weights far up this slope without restin'," he said.

So the party separated, and half an hour

after a halloo from Old Huck brought them together again.

There was another place where the road-agents had halted, for there were the three tell-tale spots of blood lying close together.

Again they separated on a search, but after hours spent in vain, they were forced to give it up, Old Huck remarking:

"Thar is snow higher up, so it's no use, now."

Back to Last Chance the party reluctantly retraced their way, after they had eaten their noonday meal, and all hope of finding a clue to the retreat of the road-agents was given up, save by Old Huckleberry, who each day went off on a hunt, though many were sure that it was a trail, not game, that he was hunting.

When at last the day came for him to start off on his run, he mounted his box without the slightest apparent reluctance, nodded good-by and drove off on his perilous journey.

There was much anxiety felt at Last Chance for his return, and a number talked of riding out to the Dead Line and meeting him, but this was not done, as a suggestion was made that the old man might not take it kindly, but look upon it as an interference, a belief that he was not able to take care of himself.

When, however, the time for his arrival came, and no stage appeared, men looked anxiously at each other and wondered if the old man was another victim to the road-agents' hunt for gold.

When an hour passed and there was no stage in sight, Doctor Dick said that he would mount his horse and go to see what was the matter.

He was not allowed to go alone, for a score of mounted men at once followed him, and the ride was a rapid one to the Dead Line, for the coach was not met on the way.

Arriving at the Dead Line the coach loomed in sight.

It was still, and dashing up the horses were found hitched to trees.

But not a soul was visible.

The box was empty, and not a soul was found within.

Where was Old Huck?

That question could not be answered, and a search was at once begun.

Upon the stage box blood was found.

That looked very bad for Old Huck.

Some one had hitched those horses to the trees surely, but who?

The coach had evidently been searched, for the cushions were thrown out and the boot open, and yet, strange to say, the mail-bag had escaped the eyes of the searchers, being found by Landlord Larry where Old Huck always hid it, viz: in one of the cushions arranged for the purpose by the old man.

Who had been killed, or what the coach had been robbed of was not revealed.

The party camped all night upon the scene, and a thorough search was made the next morning again for the missing driver.

Miles back on the trail had the miners ridden, and more, every rock and thicket by the way was thoroughly searched, yet all in vain.

At last the party were reluctantly compelled to give up further search for Old Huck, be he dead or alive, for not the slightest clue could be found and there was no trace of any trail whatever.

Doctor Dick mounted the box and drove the coach back to Last Chance, and the miners had knocked off work and were assembled to hear bad news, which the delay caused them to look for.

Landlord Larry and Doctor Dick at once held a consultation upon their return, and it was decided to send Harding again to Fort Faraway as a courier with a message to Buffalo Bill.

But when called upon to go, to the surprise of both, Harding refused to go.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NUMBER FIVE TAKES THE REINS.

"You went before, Pard Harding, so why refuse this time, when you know it is our duty to report, as agreed, to Buffalo Bill, the attacks of the road-agents upon the coaches, that he may place the matter before the

commandant?" said Doctor Dick, who was anxious to have the mysterious disappearance of Old Huckleberry known.

"I went before, Doctor Dick, but I do not care to go again," was Harding's firm rejoinder.

"Do you fear to go?" asked Landlord Larry, with a smile.

"If you think that I am influenced by fear I will prove to the contrary," was the quiet rejoinder.

"By going?"

"No."

"How then?"

"Have you a driver to take the coach out to W— on its next run, landlord?"

"No, unless Doctor Dick will kindly do so."

"I cannot," was the quick response of the doctor.

"Then I will," said the young miner.

"You?"

"Yes, landlord."

"Do you know how to drive?"

"I have driven six in hand often."

"When?"

"I drove wagons and ambulances in the army, and on one occasion drove the general with four in hand over four hundred miles of the worst country I ever saw."

"I guess you will do then, and it is far easier to get a courier to go to the fort than it is a driver for the coach."

"Yes, as if I go under, Pard Larry, I will be Number Five that has had trouble."

"Five?" asked the doctor meditatively.

"Yes, Bud Benton was Number One, Dave Dockery was Number Two, Doctor Dick, and Old Huckleberry Number Four, so I will come in as Five."

"You are right."

"And you are in earnest, Harding?" asked the landlord.

"Certainly."

"You know all that you risk?"

"Thoroughly."

"Then I retract my words in asking you if you feared to go to the fort as courier, for your volunteering as driver proves that you fear nothing."

"All right, Pard Larry, let it go at that."

"Well, Harding, consider yourself engaged for the berth of driver, and be ready to take the coach out on its next run."

"You will find me on hand."

"And let me tell you that I am authorized to pay three times the regular wages."

"It will come acceptable."

"If you live to get it," was the suggestive response of Landlord Larry.

This having been settled upon, greatly to Larry's relief, he further talked with Doctor Dick, and it was decided that as Old Huck had only disappeared, and the coach had not been robbed of the mails, they would send no report of the affair to Buffalo Bill, but wait and see how Harding came out with his drive.

The news soon spread about that Hal Harding had volunteered to drive the coach through to W— and he at once became a hero in the camps, for those bold fellows always loved heroism in a man above all other qualities.

He was however regarded as a dead man beforehand, for that he would be killed seemed a foregone conclusion, and many felt pity for the fate that they felt assured would befall the handsome young miner.

But Harding seemed not to dread the drive in the least, but went on about his duties in his usual cheery way.

Sticking to the work in his mine he had found that it panned out richer than he had anticipated, and he already had partnership offers, and a good price if he would sell.

He had kept his eyes open too, in his secret service work for Buffalo Bill, and had noted down certain discoveries he had made of a suspicious nature, and also had the names of a few whom he considered worth while watching.

At last the day came for the coach to start out, and as nothing had been heard of Old Huck, Hal Harding reported at the hotel ready to mount the box and drive through.

As he passed through the crowd he could not but hear several remarks that were made, one being:

"He is Number Five, and he is doomed also."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TAKING CHANCES.

THERE was not a shadow of dread, at the fate that might be his, upon the face of Hal Harding as he mounted to the stage box and gathered up the reins.

The mails were aboard, and he knew that he had a valuable freight hidden away, as best it could be, of gold-dust, being risked by miners who were sending it eastward.

What gold was to be sent out was always kept a secret, known only to the senders, to Landlord Larry and the driver, and though it was taking chances to let it go, the senders were risking it, as gamblers chance money in large sums upon the turn of a card.

Then too there was a very strange feature in the holding up of the coaches, and that was the fact that they had never been halted on the outward run, no matter how much gold they carried out, but always when bringing back to Last Chance the exchange in bank notes.

The road-agents knew that they could carry large sums in money where they could not be bothered with gold in bulk, was the reason that Landlord Larry assigned for the attacks being made only on the westward runs of the coaches.

Not a passenger was to go, and Harding sung out in a cheerful tone:

"All ready."

"Go," cried Larry, and the vehicle rolled away in a manner that showed that the young miner was a good driver, as he had asserted that he was.

The crowd cheered wildly, the voices echoing down the canyon as he drove along, and now and then he would raise his hat to those who greeted him from their cabins and mines as he went along.

Out of the valley he turned, swinging at a brisk trot along through canyons, over hills, up mountains, by the way of narrow passes and down again to the valleys.

He reached the relay station nearest Last Chance, and made known to the stock-tender the fate of Old Huck.

"You goes next, pard, for it won't be long afore Doctor Dick will come along and tell me that poor Hal Harding has gone under," said the sympathetic stock-tender.

"Think so?"

"Sure of it."

"Why Doctor Dick?"

"Waal, ef you gets kilt no other man in or out o' Last Chance will have ther grit to drive ther old Death Trap, for thet hearse you is sittin' on is no more."

"It is an unlucky old vehicle I admit, pard; but I'll be going," and Harding drove on once more.

He had not seen a soul at the Dead Line.

All was as quiet at that dread spot as the forms of those who had lost their lives there.

Only the stockmen at the station greeted him on the way, and at night he came to the halting cabin a little ahead of time.

He had the same story to tell at each one of the relay stations, about the fate of Old Huck, and an ominous shake of the head from those who listened convinced him that they expected him to be the next victim.

The next morning he rolled into W— a few minutes ahead of time, and the stage-agent seemed surprised to see a new man upon the box.

He heard what Harding had to say of Old Huck, listened to his report of his uneventful run and received from him the waybill of what he carried.

"You have done well, Mr. Harding, and I hope we will hear no more of these attacks, so that you may escape, for, if they make a victim of you I do not know who we can look to unless it be that fearless fellow Doctor Dick."

"And his practice, mining interests and gambling occupy him so thoroughly that he will not drive again, sir, I am sure."

"Not unless no other can be found, for he is just the man to step in then in open defiance of danger."

"Yes, he is just what you say of him, sir."

"Now, how is that poor passenger who was crazed by a shot from the road-agents?"

"Aimlessly wandering about Last Chance, harmless and to be pitied."

"Well, I have received letters asking

about him, and had to make a report of the circumstances."

"It will be upon your return trip that you will have to be watchful."

"I will be, sir, never fear," was the cheery response.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT THE DEAD LINE.

THE news of the mysterious disappearance of the old driver, Huckleberry, soon spread about W— and people gathered about the stage-office to have a look at the brave fellow who had, in the face of the past experience, brought the coach through.

The agent had told Harding that if the mails had gone through nothing had been taken, for no freight had been sent and no passengers were along on that trip.

As they had found nothing to take, the road-agents had doubtless visited their vengeance upon Old Huck, especially to repay him for having run the gantlet of them on a former occasion.

There were passengers booked for Last Chance by stage, but when it became known that Old Huck had been killed, as all supposed he must have been, they concluded they were in no great hurry to reach the mining-camps and could wait a while longer.

So Harding discovered that he would have to return with an empty coach, as far as passengers were concerned.

He showed no disappointment, however, at having to return alone, and was told by the agent that he was to carry back considerable money and a valuable mail.

"All right, sir, I'll do my best to go through in safety," he said, and he grasped the outstretched hand of the agent, who said:

"I feel as though I was shaking hands with a man about to die."

"Now I don't feel that way in the least," was the laughing response, and Harding sprung up to the box, seized his reins, cracked his whip when he got the word, and was off.

The crowd gathered there cheered him, of course, but a generally sad expression rested upon every face as they looked upon the brave young miner who had taken his life in his hand to drive what was now called the Death Trap.

Having halted for the night at the Way Cabin, Harding pushed on the next morning with the first glimmer of dawn, and reached the third relay at noon.

There was then one more relay and the run into Last Chance, which in good weather could readily be made before sunset.

He passed the last relay, and the "Job's comforter" who resided there in the person of the stock-tender, said, as he was about to start:

"Good-by, pard, and do you know I kinder feels as if yer was a dead man already."

"Don't you believe it, for I am worth a dozen dead men, old man," was the laughing response, and Harding drove on, with the Dead Line rising in his mind before him.

He drove more rapidly than was the schedule time, and when he came into the pass, with the Dead Line just ahead, he had half an hour to spare.

The horses pricked up their ears, as though they knew the doomed place well, and the leaders gave a snort as they beheld a form ahead.

It was a man leaning against the cross erected in memory of Bud Benton, and to commemorate the unhallowed spot.

That Harding also saw the form was certain, for his eyes were riveted upon the spot.

As he drew nearer, the man moved away from the cross and advanced down into the trail.

Still Harding made no move to halt, to rush by, or appeared to take notice of him.

The man placed himself by the side of the trail and stood as still as a statue, after making a slight sign, as it appeared.

The answer of Harding to this sign was to shake his head.

On rolled the coach, and when it neared the silent form, without any command to do so, Harding drew hard upon the reins, pressed his foot heavily upon the brake and brought the coach to a standstill, the horses,

which had before drawn it through the deadly dangers it had passed at that spot, showing a restless dread and expectancy of the cracking of revolvers.

But there was no weapon drawn either by the man on the side of the trail, or by Harding, and neither seemed to dread the other.

The reason for this was that the one who had awaited the coming of the coach at the Dead Line was none other than Old Huckleberry.

CHAPTER XXX.

A SECRET KEPT.

JUST fifteen minutes before the time of arrival set for the coach by schedule, Hal Harding drove up to the hotel at Last Chance.

From his entering the valley, and passing the first mine, he had been followed by cheer after cheer, until when he reached the shanty, known as Landlord Larry's tavern there were many there to swell the chorus of welcome.

Larry greeted him most warmly, and when he saw what a valuable freight he had brought through with him, he told him that he was deserving of the highest praise.

Had Harding taken one half the drinks offered him he would have soon been paralyzed.

But he was not a drinking man, received the honors heaped upon him in a modest manner, and when asked by Landlord Larry if he had seen any road-agents, answered:

"Not one."

"All quiet along the trail then?"

"As quiet as the grave."

"I suppose you were anxious upon reaching the Dead Line?"

"I think the horses were more nervous than I was, for they at least showed it."

"You told the agent at W—— about Old Huck's fate?"

"Of course, sir, I told him of his mysterious disappearance."

"Do you know I half-way hoped you would hear something of Old Huck at W——."

"No, I heard nothing of him there."

"And none of the stock-tenders had seen him?"

"They did not speak to me of having done so."

"Well, he is gone, that is certain; but you have begun well, Harding, and I hope may keep it up."

"Thank you, Landlord Larry, I hope that I will, for I have an abiding faith in the belief that I will live to be an old man."

"I hope so sincerely," said the doctor, who had been an attentive listener to the conversation between the young miner and Larry.

"They say at W——, Doctor Dick, that if I go under, you will be the only man who will dare drive the coach through."

"And I will not do it, unless we are doomed to be cut off from all communication, and I see that Last Chance will be ruined, from fear of traveling the trail to it," said Doctor Dick, decidedly.

"How is your patient, doctor?"

"Which one, for I have a number of patients just now."

"The young man whose wound at the hands of the road-agents turned his brain."

"I see him daily, and he is about the same, like a child of four, mentally."

"They asked about him at W——, for the agent had received several letters regarding him."

"Ah!" said Doctor Dick, with interest.

"What was their tenor?"

"That he had come out West upon a special mission, and with considerable money, and, since leaving W—— where he had written of his arrival, not a word had been heard from him."

"I am glad that he has friends, then, for he will be cared for in his misfortune."

"Yes, Doctor Dick, and the agent hinted that some one was coming out to look him up."

"I rejoice at this, for he needs care," the doctor rejoined, and he added:

"I have been convinced that he was no ordinary individual, and had been well reared; but what a blow it will be to his friends to find him as he is, poor fellow."

After some further conversation Harding went to his cabin for the night; but he was not long in discovering that he was regarded as a hero by all.

He had not made the slightest reference to having met Old Huckleberry at the Dead Line, and as he thought over the fact that he had done so, and the secret that was known to him alone, he muttered to himself:

"If they but knew, what a sensation it would be for Last Chance, yes, and for W—— as well, not to speak of the masked road-agent chief and his men, who thus far have been playing a winning game; but luck sometimes turns, and I guess it is nearing the turning point now to come our way."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A MIDNIGHT DRIVE.

HARDING reported for duty promptly when the time came around for him to take the coach again on its perilous run.

"We have got considerable gold-dust aboard, pard, and a big outgoing mail, so I hope you will go through all right," said Landlord Larry, while Doctor Dick who just then came up said:

"Yes, Harding, I have several valuable letters in the mail, with drafts for large sums which I sincerely hope will not miscarry."

"I'll do the best I can, Doctor Dick," was the answer, and Harding went out and mounted the box.

He could not but feel gratified at the size of the crowd that had gathered to see him depart, and he raised his sombrero politely in response to the cheers.

He had gone through in safety once; but could he do it a second time?

That was the thought in the brain of every man there assembled.

At last the word was given and away went the coach, cheered all the way down the valley until it was out of sight.

As before the young driver lost no time on the trail, but upon reaching the Dead Line, instead of seeming to dread the spot and wishing to drive rapidly by, he dismounted from the box and going to the cross, felt about among the wild flowers growing about it until he picked up a slip of paper, while he hastily read what he found written thereon.

Taking from his pocket a similar slip, on which there was writing, he thrust it out of sight in the spot he had taken the other from.

Then he returned to the coach and drove on once more as though he felt no fear of his surroundings.

He reached the night cabin on time, and surprised the stock-tender there by telling him that he intended to drive on to W—— that night.

"You don't mean it?"

"I certainly do."

"Why yer'll kill yer team, smash ther old box and crush yerself to atoms."

"I believe I can drive the road at night," was the firm response.

"It's ther wu'st piece of road on ther whole Overland Trail."

"It is a bad one, but I will depend upon my team mainly and risk it."

"Why do you do it?"

"I have an idea that it will be safer."

"How so?"

"Well, if there were road-agents on the trail to hold me up to-morrow, I'll miss them, that is all."

"Right you are, pard; but I don't believe they is as dangerous as traveling this trail to-night."

"I'll let you know what I think upon my return," was Harding's answer and he drove on once more.

Night had come on and he well knew the dangers before him from a mistake in driving.

He had been over the road perhaps half a dozen times, always riding upon the box, but upon his last run as driver he had most carefully noted every foot of the way.

The night was dark, but he knew that he had the instinct of his team to depend upon and this was more than half the battle.

He was determined to push through and

save his load of gold, and if he did make a successful run over that part of the trail by night, he would do what no other driver had done, and on this account his pride was at stake.

So he started boldly yet cautiously upon his way, and when the sun was just rising in W—— the stage-agent there was awakened by wheels dashing up to his door and heard the call:

"The coach from Last Chance has arrived."

He was up in a hurry and congratulating the young driver upon his night drive, while he said:

"Do you know I feared you would be held up to-day, for a party of desperadoes lately left W—— and I felt most anxious about you."

"Yes, they are on the trail waiting for me now, not knowing that I slipped by in the night."

"I'll get together a band of brave fellows and go back after them," and an hour after Harding was mounted upon a fine horse and leading a dozen men back upon the trail he had safely driven over in the night.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MYSTERIOUS SOUND.

THE stage agent at W—— was right in declaring that the coach might be held up on the rough trail that was always driven by daylight, for the party he feared were half a dozen wild fellows who had ridden into the settlement two days before and stated that they were on their way to the mines.

They were well mounted and armed, had several pack-horses with them, and, though not having the excuse of drinking to make them dreaded, had carried on in a way that caused all peaceably disposed persons to dread them.

Who they were no one knew, and when they left the place honest men breathed more freely and congratulated each other that no tragedy had occurred, as a reminder of their visit.

They had gone out upon the trail to Last Chance late in the afternoon, and the agent felt sure that they would camp early and meet the coach the next morning, and the result he greatly feared, after a look at the party in question, so he was rejoiced to find that Harding had taken the great risk of driving through by night.

The crowd that he dreaded were five in number, and they were young men, bronzed-faced, brawny and with an air of recklessness stamped upon them.

That they were a dangerous lot their appearance indicated, and few men would care to face them where no help was at hand.

They had halted some dozen miles from W—— and gone into camp on a brook a few hundred yards from the trail the stage would follow.

That they knew their way well their movements were proof of, for they rode at once to the camping-place, staked out their horses, spread their blankets and gathered wood to cook their supper with.

The spot chosen was one where they could command a view of the trail for a mile in both directions yet remain in concealment themselves.

They had supper, then gambled awhile by the light of the fire and afterward turned in, setting no watch.

It was about midnight when one of the party awoke, half arose and listened.

He heard a rumbling sound that seemed to surprise him.

"I say, pards," he called out.

A man awoke and asked drowsily:

"What is it, Sully?"

"I hear wheels."

"Nonsense."

"But I do."

"It's the roar of the stream."

"I don't think so."

"I does."

Others were awakened and listened, and they distinctly heard a low, rumbling sound.

But after some minutes the sound died away and the one who had first discovered it asked:

"Do you think it could have been the coach?"

"No, indeed."

"Why not?"

"No man living would dare drive a coach over this trail at night."

"It sounded to me like wheels."

"There it is again."

All listened attentively, and then one said:

"It is the wind in the pines."

The wind was rising and this solution of mysterious sound seemed to settle the matter, so all laid down in their blankets once more.

The man who had discovered the sound was the one to arise first in the morning, and the day was just dawning when he left his blankets, gazed about him and then walked over to where the stage-trail ran, several hundred yards from their camp, and along through a bit of meadow land.

He had hardly reached the trail when he gave a loud halloo.

The voice brought his comrades from their blankets in an instant, and his call set them coming toward him at a run.

"Look there, pards!" he cried, and as each man reached his side he stood gazing down at the trail.

"The stage has gone by," said one, with an oath, as his eyes fell upon the tracks of the six horses and the wheel-marks, lately made.

"Then one man was bold enough to dare the drive at night!"

"Sure, and the chief will be furious with us!"

"What is to be done now?"

"The coach is safe in W— now, for if that fellow drove safely over the back trail he had no trouble beyond here."

"Then we had better get a move on us."

"Sure, for that agent suspects us, and there'll be a gang on our heels mighty quick," and hastening back to camp the party mounted and rode rapidly on toward the mountains.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A FAIR PASSENGER.

HARDING had ridden rapidly upon the trail back toward the night relay, for he felt sure that the agent was right, in his conjecture that the party of wild fellows who had left W— had intended to hold him up on the trail the next day when he came along.

In fact the slip of paper he had picked up at the Dead Line had been a warning to that effect, and hence he had dared take the drive at night, hoping thus to elude his foes, and had been successful.

When he reached the trail where the party had turned off to camp, they soon came upon their halting-place, and as the ashes of their fire were cold, it proved that they had departed before having breakfast there.

"Something frightened them off," said Harding.

"But I wonder they did not hear my wheels, camping as they did this near to the strage trail."

"They kept no watch doubtless; but will you follow them?"

"Yes, to the relay station at least."

Arriving there, for their trail had been lost in the rocky soil, Harding found that the men had not passed, so they turned back for W— arriving there by nightfall.

The coaches that came in from the South and East the next morning brought valuable mail for Last Chance, but, to the surprise of all, a lady passenger.

She was a young lady, and veiled, but enough was seen of her face to reveal its beauty, while her form was of faultless mold.

She was dressed in perfect keeping for one on a long journey, and carried only a small trunk with her.

She told the station-agent that her name was Celeste Seldon, and that she had come West for a double purpose, searching for her father, and one other whom she was most anxious to find.

The last she had heard of her father was in a letter dated from W—, and a secret communication, also mailed from W—, was the last tidings received from the second person she sought.

"I wrote you, Mr. Agent," she said in her sweet way, "asking about a young man,

Bernard Brandon by name, who had come West upon a special mission.

"You replied that he had been to W— and gone on from here to Last Chance, a mining-camp, and though I have written there, no response came, so I decided to come myself and investigate.

"Have you heard anything more of Mr. Brandon?"

The agent looked troubled, and seeing it she said quickly:

"You have heard of him, so I beg you to tell me all."

"I regret to say, miss, that he was wounded on his way to Last Chance, shot by road-agents; but here is Harding, the driver of the Last Chance coach, and he can tell you all."

Harding did not appear to like having to give pain to the young girl, but he frankly told her of the wound of the young man, who could be no other than Bernard Brandon, and the pitiful result.

"I will go to him."

"When do you start, sir?"

"This afternoon, miss; but the trail is a very dangerous one, and I had better bring him back with me."

"No, I will go with you, and I will speak for the box seat, if it is not engaged."

"Oh no, no seats are engaged, for all dread the trail between here and Last Chance."

"I do not, so I ride with you, sir, on the box seat," was the determined reply of the young girl.

She paid her fare, and when the coach started, after having dinner at the agent's, mounted to the box with Harding's aid, and took her seat by the young driver, while the crowd yelled lustily as they drove off to face the dangers of the Dead Line Trail.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A GIRL'S PLUCK.

HARDING drove off with the air of one who felt his full responsibility in having the care of a young and beautiful girl, who dared risk the dangerous road he had to travel.

He found that his fair companion, as soon as she left the settlement, was very beautiful, for she removed her veil when only having to be gazed upon by one person, and that one a very handsome young miner.

It did not take her very long to discover that her companion, though driving an Overland coach, was above the average she had thus far met with among the Western wilds, for he was polite, well informed, and his courage was proven by what he was then doing, for Miss Seldon had been told by the agent just what trouble they had had on the line.

The night relay was reached, and as there had been no expectation of ever accommodating young ladies, no provision had been made for them, so Harding and the stock-tender yielded the cabin to the fair passenger, while they occupied a shanty near by.

The stock-tender exerted himself to make her comfortable, and to provide the best supper and breakfast his larder would allow.

"What a surprise they will get in Last Chance when they see her, pard. Why, them miners will make a goddess of her, whatever that may be," said the stock-tender.

"Yes, if we only get through, pard, for do you know I am more anxious now than when I am alone?"

"Why is that?"

"Well, I have my reasons; but let me tell you that I mean fight on this run if we are held up," and the eyes of the young driver flashed fire.

The next morning the coach started upon its way half an hour earlier than usual, and Harding pushed his horses along at a far faster pace than they were accustomed to.

For some reason he seemed anxious to get by the Dead Line far ahead of time, and to push on into Last Chance with all speed that was possible.

He found his fair charge most entertaining, and she asked him all about life in the Wild West, and he was surprised to discover how much she knew of the frontier and its characters.

She spoke of army officers known to her

well by name, mentioned Buffalo Bill as a hero well known in the East, and seemed anxious to glean all the information she could of the strange country into which she had ventured.

At last she touched upon the cause of her coming, and her face saddened as she said:

"It grieves me deeply to learn of the sad result of Mr. Brandon's wound, though I cannot but feel, as you say that he is bodily strong, that something can be done to restore his mind."

"He came here on a mission for me, to find my father, who, I will confess to you, was driven West by pretended friends and false misrepresentations that kept him here, as though he had been the veriest criminal hiding from justice."

"But it is not so, and I long to find my father and restore him to his home and those who love him."

"Have you ever heard of him here?—his name was Andrew Seldon."

"No, Miss Seldon, I never have heard the name, that I now recall."

"Where was he when last you heard of him?"

"Several letters came into my possession long after they were written, for I have not seen my father for seven long years, and I was a little girl then, and the last of those letters was mailed at W—."

"In it he stated that he had been in the mining country, had been most successful, and would come home within a year or two."

"But this letter did not come to my hands directly, and it was answered by others, his enemies and mine, and so I, upon learning the truth, and of a cruel plot against him and myself, got Mr. Brandon to come and look him up that he might know all."

"As a dread came, upon receiving the agent's letter, that harm had befallen Mr. Brandon, I decided to come at once to the West myself, for I was reared on a plantation, am a good rider, have been inured to hardships and can handle firearms when there is need for them, so I was fitted for just such a trip as I am now taking; but here I am making a *confidant* of you, Mr. Harding, when I should be keeping my own counsel."

"Oh, no, I am glad to know more of you, and it may be in my power to aid you, for I will gladly do all in my power for you."

"I feel that, and we will be friends; but why do you look so anxious?"

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do."

"Well, to be candid, I am anxious for your sake, not mine, for I half-dread trouble on this run, and we are nearing the scene of several tragedies and which the miners call the Dead Line."

"Will you not ride in the coach now?"

"No, I take all chances with you and remain where I am," was the plucky reply of Celeste Seldon.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MASKED FOES.

THE brave response of Celeste Seldon pleased the young miner though he did not wish her to remain upon the box.

He knew the merciless nature of the road-agents, and that if they fired without challenging him, she stood in as much danger as he did of being killed or wounded.

So he said:

"I would much rather that you should go inside the coach, especially until we pass the Dead Line."

"No, I remain here."

"You are determined?"

"I am."

"Then I can say no more, and I think, recognizing that I have a lady with me, they will not fire upon me."

"You seem to confidently expect an attack."

"I am sorry to say that I do."

"May I ask your reasons?"

"Well, I happen to know that one who was secretly on watch here on my last run, is not here to-day, having been called away."

"I also know that five horsemen, whom I have reason to believe to be road-agents, left W— ahead of me for the purpose of robbing the coach."

"Have you much of value with you?"
 "I have considerable money in bank-notes for miners at Last Chance."
 "Is it too bulky for me to hide?"
 "I think not, miss."
 "Then let me try it."
 A halt was made and the money taken from its hiding-place.
 The young girl asked:
 "Do you know the amount that is here?"
 "Yes, miss, it is stated here," and he handed out a paper.

"I will take the paper and the money, for I can hide it," and with this she put it in a silk bag that she carried and fastened it securely beneath the skirt of her dress.
 Feeling relieved on this point, Harding drove on and soon after came in sight of the Dead Line.

He had just come up level with the cross that marked the fatal spot of former tragedies, and was talking to his team, which showed much nervousness at passing a scene which they realized as one to dread, when loud rung a voice:

"Hold hard, Harding, or you are a dead man!"

Not a soul was visible among the rocks or in the trees, and Harding had it flash through his mind to make a dash, when quickly the hand of the young girl was laid upon his arm and she said firmly:

"Obey!"
 "I must do so," was the low reply, for the young man realized that it would bring a volley upon them to attempt to dash through.

So his foot went hard down upon the brake, as he pulled his horses up and the stage came to a halt.

"Make your lines fast around the brake and hands up now!" came the order from the unseen foe.

"You must obey," said Celeste Seldon, as the driver hesitated.

With a muttered imprecation Harding obeyed, and then out from the thicket came a horseman.

His horse was enveloped in a black blanket that gave him the appearance of the steeds of the knights of old, robed out in mail, for his ears, head and neck were covered and it fell to his knees.

The covering was over the saddle, too, so that it as well as the bridle were concealed.

The horseman wore a black robe like a domino, shielding his form completely, and his face was covered by a red, close-fitting mask, while a cowl covered his head.

"The devil on horseback," muttered Harding, as he beheld the man, and right there he made up his mind that if he was the sole one who held up the coach, he would watch his chance, if he could get Celeste Seldon away from his side, and try a duel with him for mastery.

But this hope died away when, as though suspecting the intention of Harding, the horseman called out:

"Come, men, and let us get to work."

Silently there came out of the thicket now half a dozen men on foot, but all enveloped in black robes, wearing red masks, and with their feet clad in moccasins, while a quick glance at the hoofs of the horse ridden by the chief showed that he had muffled on, to prevent making a track.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A HOSTAGE.

THE young girl seated by the side of Harding calmly surveyed the scene, and her sympathy seemed to be with the young driver, who, she could see, felt the situation keenly.

The half-dozen men appearing at the call of their chief, seemed to be well trained, for two of them went to the heads of the horses, two more to either door of the coach and the others awaited orders.

The horseman rode close up to the side of the coach; his hand upon his revolver.

"Harding, I see that you meditate resistance if opportunity offers, but let me warn you that you are a dead man the instant you make any attempt to escape or fire upon us."

"I would kill you now without the slightest hesitation, only I fear it would break up the line and travel to Last Chance and that I do not wish."

"Dismount from that box, and remember, my revolver covers you!"

Harding obeyed in sullen silence.

"Now what freight have you on?"

"I have the mails, and this lady passenger, but, low as you are, you will not rob her, I hope."

"There was money sent through by you to Last Chance."

"You pretend to know this, but I have no money for Last Chance."

"I know better."

"There is the coach, search it; but let me tell you, if you touch the United States mails you will have every soldier stationed at W— and at Faraway on your track."

"I believe you are right about that, and I do not care to fight the Government by robbing the mails; but the money I want."

"I have not got any, I told you."

"I do not believe you."

"Then find it."

"I will."

A thorough search of the coach was made, and then the driver was searched but without any money being found.

"I know that the sum of thirty thousand dollars was to be sent by you to the miners in Last Chance."

"You know this?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Never mind, but I know it."

"Well, you see that your spy misinformed you."

"As the money cannot be found it is a dead loss to me, and I hold you responsible."

"All right, I am."

"But, as I said, if I kill you no man will be found to take your place—"

"Oh, yes, Doctor Dick will."

"D— Doctor Dick—I beg pardon, miss, but he refers to one whom I hate, and some day will be avenged upon."

"Well, if you kill me you will have the chance, for he will drive."

"With even that hope to get even with him, I will not kill you, yet I must have that money or a hostage."

"Take me then."

"No, I could not realize the amount on you."

"Then do without."

"Not I, when there is a hostage at hand."

"Who?"

"This lady."

"Coward! you would not dare."

"Won't I? Then see, for that lady becomes my prisoner until I receive that money."

"What money?"

"The thirty thousand you beat me out of to day."

"How can you get it by taking me with you?" asked Celeste Sheldon quietly.

"Why very easily, miss."

"How so, may I ask?"

"Harding will go on to Last Chance and report that I have you as my prisoner, to hold until the miners pay me the sum of—well, I'll add interest, so call it thirty-five thousand dollars."

"The miners have nothing to do with me, sir, they do not even know me."

"That does not matter, for they are a gallant lot of men, rough though they may look, and many of them be, so, when it is known what I have done, they will chip in generously and the money will be raised very quickly."

"How will you get it?" asked Harding.

"I will meet you on any day we may agree upon, at this spot, with this lady, and you will come alone, as I will, and the exchange of the hostage for the money will be made."

"If you come with others, or attempt treachery, I swear to you I will kill the girl before your eyes, so if you wish to have that done, play traitor, while, if you act squarely with me all will be well."

"What do you say?"

"I will say, as it cannot be otherwise, I will be your hostage until the money is paid you," said Celeste Seldon firmly.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SACRIFICE.

THE plucky stand taken by Celeste Seldon won the admiration of Harding at once.

He did not understand why she had been so prompt in her reply, so willing to at once yield herself as a hostage until a ransom was received for her release.

But she did offer, and he at once decided what he should do.

So he said:

"See here, cut-throat, I have something to say to you."

"Well, out with it, but be more choice in your epithets bestowed on me, if you wish to keep in good health."

"What! don't like the name eh? Well, I called you by a name that denotes your calling."

"What have you to say?"

"Just this, that if you will allow this young lady to ride on to Last Chance, on one of my stage-horses, for he will carry her safely there, I will remain your hostage until Landlord Larry sends the money out to you which you demand."

"As a hostage you are of no value, but the lady is."

"Well again?"

"What is it?"

"If I pay you the amount you said was to be sent by me, will you let the lady go?"

"When will you pay it?"

"Now."

"Do so, and I will let the lady go free."

"No, no, sir, you have not the money," cried Celeste to Harding.

"Yes, miss, I can make it good, for, altogether I have a little more saved up than he demands, and I can start over again to lay up a fortune, you see, for I am young yet."

"I will not consent to that, except that I return you the money, my kind friend, for I am well able to do so, as I am by no means a poor girl."

"I will recompense you, by paying you back my ransom."

"We will not quarrel on that score, miss, so give him the money," said Harding.

Celeste turned, and raising her skirt took the bag of money from its hiding-place.

This she handed to Harding who threw it at the masked outlaw's feet with the remark:

"Your spy informed you correctly; there is the money: just thirty-two thousand dollars."

"Thank you," and he quietly counted the money before he spoke again.

"Yes, it is all here."

"Now, miss, had Harding ransomed you, it was your intention to have repaid him, you said."

"By all means, for I have no claim upon that brave gentleman."

"You are able to pay back so large a ransom, are you?"

"Had I not been able to pay it back I would not have made the offer to do so."

"You have not got the money with you?"

"Oh, no, I am no traveling bank, nor am I a fool."

"Well said; but as you are able to pay a ransom for yourself, I shall hold you a prisoner until you pay me the money I demand."

An oath burst involuntarily from the lips of Harding at this treachery on the part of the road-agent, while the young girl turned pale with momentary dread.

But she said firmly:

"After receiving the money you demanded, and which I feel it my duty to pay back, as it is really my ransom, will you be so vile, so lost to all manhood, as to enforce your words against me?"

"What more can you expect of one who has no character, who is already damned body and soul."

"Oh, no, I have no conscience, so do not appeal to me, for all I wish in the world is gold and that I will have, no matter who the victim, what the means I have to take to get it."

"You are indeed lost to every human feeling."

"So I said, and you are my prisoner until this man, Harding, brings me, well, say thirty thousand dollars ransom money for your safe delivery to him once more."

"Now, miss, I will take your baggage along, for you may need it, and you will go with me."

"Where would you take me?"

"To my retreat, and you will be treated with respect; but money I must have.

"As for you, Harding, go on to Last Chance and raise the money for this lady's ransom.

"Give it to Doctor Dick, and let him come with you in your coach on your next run out.

"Halt just here, and he will be met by one of my men with this lady.

"If others come, her life shall be the forfeit.

"When my messenger receives the money, this lady shall be given into the charge of Doctor Dick.

"Do you understand?"

"I do, and you will understand that all of Last Chance, every man capable of carrying a gun, will be upon your trail before night."

"Just let any one pursue me, and instead of finding me, you will discover the dead body of this young girl in the trail awaiting you.

"Remember, I am not to be followed, or intimidated.

"Do you understand now?"

Harding made no reply, for he was too much overcome to speak; but the small leather trunk belonging to Celeste Seldon having been taken from the coach, along with a side-saddle and bridle she had brought with her, the driver clasped her hand in farewell.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE STORY TOLD.

As Harding grasped her hand, unable himself to speak, for his emotion at being unable to protect the girl overcame him, Celeste Seldon said:

"I would like to have a word with this gentleman."

She spoke to the masked chief, who replied:

"Before me, yes."

"Very well, I have no secret to make known to him, so you may hear."

Then turning to Harding, she continued:

"You have been most kind to me, sir, and I appreciate it.

"You have done all in your power for me, no one could do more; but let me say to you if you can raise the sum demanded by this—this—robber, do so, and every dollar shall be refunded to you within a few days after my return East."

"The men won't ask it, miss."

"But I shall pay it.

"Now to the reason in part of my coming here."

"Yes, miss."

"Try to find out for me among the miners, if a man by the name of Andrew Seldon is known to any of them, and if so where he is."

"I will."

"Try also to do all in your power for that poor young man Bernard Brandon, who, you told me, had been crazed by a bullet wound, doubtless given by this very—murderer."

"Yes, I shot him, and killed Dave Dockery the driver, and a miner at the same time," was the remark of the masked road-agent, delivered with the utmost effrontery.

"You seem proud of your red work, sir."

"Yes, killing is a trade with me just now."

Celeste Seldon turned from him with disgust and horror, and addressing Harding continued:

"Ask the one you spoke of as Doctor Dick, to do all in his power for that poor sufferer, and he shall be well rewarded for it.

"When I am released I will go to Last Chance, as it was my intention, and do all I can to find my father, and minister to the sufferings of poor Mr. Brandon.

"Now I thank you once more and bid you good-by."

Harding clasped her hand, dared not to trust himself to speak, but there were volumes in the look of intense hatred he cast upon the masked face of the road-agent chief.

Then he mounted to the stage-box, gathered up his lines and drove away in a silence that was most expressive.

He glanced back as he came to the end of the canyon, but saw that the road-agents and their fair prisoner had already disappeared.

Then the lash descended upon the backs of the startled horses and the team was sent along at a pace that was most dangerous indeed.

But Harding could only find vent for his pent-up feelings by rapid and reckless driving, and never before had the distance between the Dead Line and Last Chance been covered in the time in which he made it.

Notwithstanding his delay at the Dead Line, he went thundering up the valley half an hour ahead of time, and when he drew rein before the hotel his horses were reeking with foam and panting like hard-run hounds.

His face was white, his eyes ablaze with anger and indignation, and his teeth set firmly.

"Great God! Harding, what has happened?" cried Landlord Larry in alarm.

Throwing the mail at the feet of the surprised landlord, Harding leaped to the ground and said hoarsely:

"Come, I wish to speak to you."

He led the way into the office and then told the whole story.

"We will mount a hundred men and go in pursuit at once," cried Larry.

"What! do you forget his threat?"

"What threat?"

"To kill the girl!"

"He will not do it."

"He will."

"No, he dare not."

"You do not know him—I do."

"Well, what is to be done?"

"Just what he demands."

"What! pay him?"

"By all means, and save the girl!"

"You are right."

"But have all ready then, the moment that she is safe, to throw five hundred mounted men on a hunt for him, have the entire country about Dead Line surrounded, and then hunt him and his men to death," savagely said Harding.

"Yes, it must be done; but now to tell the men what has happened," and Landlord Larry went out, followed by Harding, to find a large crowd of miners gathered about the hotel.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE RANSOM.

LANDLORD LARRY was considerably non-plused by what had been told him by Harding, and he hardly knew how to break the news to the miners.

Hundreds had assembled, for the mad race of Harding's team up the valley had told them that something had gone wrong.

So they had hurried in twos and by half-dozens to the hotel to hear what had happened.

They were more eager to learn it all when it was told how Harding had made no report, but had led Landlord Larry into the office and been closeted there with him an hour.

The panting horses had been led away to the stable, the mail had been opened by Landlord Larry's clerk, and many had gotten letters.

But the interest in letters was lost in the desire to learn what had happened on Harding's run in.

When the two men were seen coming out of the hotel, a wild yell greeted them.

Landlord Larry stepped out upon the piazza, and at once a silence fell upon the crowd, while every eye was turned upon the white face of Harding.

"Men, I have bad news for you," said Landlord Larry.

"The coach has been held up again, and thirty-two thousand dollars in money, given to driver Harding to bring to Last Chance, was taken.

"There are some forty of you who feel this loss, having sent your gold out to be exchanged for this money.

"But that is not the worst of it.

"The mails were not disturbed, as the road-agent said that he wished no trouble with the Government.

"Nor is this all, for Harding had a

passenger with him on this run, a young girl."

"Where is she?" came in a chorus of voices.

"I will tell you:

"There were seven road-agents, all masked, and their chief mounted.

"They held the coach up at the Dead Line, and they covered Harding with their rifles, and demanded the money which, in some way, they knew he had.

"The young lady had hidden it for him, but as she was to be held for ransom, she gave it up, and learning that she was rich, the road-agent chief then demanded ransom from her."

And speaking slowly and distinctly Landlord Larry went on to tell the whole story of the coach and taking of Celeste Seldon captive.

The crowd was as silent as death, except for the suppressed breathing of the men, and the bronzed faces of the miners paled and flushed by turns.

When at last it was told how a ransom of thirty thousand dollars was demanded, before a word had been said that it would be paid back, a yell arose:

"We'll raise it!"

"Good! that is just what I knew you would do, pards, and I will head the list with five hundred," said Landlord Larry.

"Put me down for five hundred," called out Harding, and the two offers were cheered, while a stern voice called out behind the landlord:

"Put me down for a thousand, Larry, for I have heard all that you have told the men."

It was Doctor Dick, who, seeing the crowd in front of the hotel, had come to the piazza by passing into the house through the rear door.

Another cheer greeted the sum named by Doctor Dick, and there arose cries on all sides as men pressed forward:

"I'll give a thousand, landlord!"

"Name me for fifty."

"Put me on the list for a hundred!"

"Twenty-five for me!"

And so on were the sums named by the noble hearted and generous fellows, even those who had lost their money by the road-agents subscribing, until Doctor Dick called out, for he had been keeping account:

"Hold on all! The amount is already named.

"Now, men, form in line, and give your names as you pass along, and the money, those who have it."

It was late when the ransom list was made up, and the men had not heeded the supper gong until after they had paid their subscriptions.

Then Landlord Larry packed the money away, and the crowd dispersed to their various occupations and pleasures for the night, which may be set down as consisting principally of drinking and gambling.

This question, regarding the unfortunate girl who had fallen into the hands of the masked and merciless outlaws being settled, the driver said to Landlord Larry and Doctor Dick, who had returned to the office in the hotel.

"Now I wish to see about the poor fellow whom that young girl was coming out to see, and also to learn about her father."

"Who was her father?" asked Landlord Larry.

"Her name is Celeste Seldon, and she wished me to ascertain if her father had ever been heard of in the mines.

"His name was Andrew Seldon."

"Andrew Seldon?" quickly said Doctor Dick.

"Yes."

"I know of such a man, or rather knew of him, for he is dead now," was the response of the gambler Gold King.

CHAPTER XL.

THE ALARM.

A CLOUD passed over the face of Harding, when he heard Doctor Dick say that Andrew Seldon was dead, and he remarked sadly:

"That poor girl seems doomed to have sorrow dog her steps.

"But you knew her father, doctor?"

"Yes, I knew him long years ago, and I happen to learn of his being out here, working for a fortune in the mines, I believe."

"You are sure that it is the one she seeks?"

"The names are the same."

"The Andrew Seldon I knew was from Tennessee."

"So was her father, and he must be the man you refer to."

"But where did he die?"

"I'll tell you what I have not made known to others."

"Buffalo Bill and I struck a trail to see what the end would bring to us, and the night before we came to the end, those we sought were buried by the caving in of a mine which they were working under a cliff."

"One of those men was Andrew Seldon and he had a companion with him."

"And they were killed?"

"Yes, buried under the cliff, that fell upon their cabin, destroying all."

"You must tell the story to the young girl, for I cannot, doctor."

"I will do so, though I hate to give a woman pain."

"Now, doctor, I wish to ask about the one she seeks here in Last Chance."

"Who is he Harding?"

"The poor fellow you so devotedly cared for, but whose reason was destroyed by the wound he received from the road-agents."

"Ah, yes, poor fellow, his mind is irrevocably wrecked."

"Where is he?"

"Landlord Larry can tell you better than I, for he seems to avoid my cabin since I gave him up as a patient."

"He wanders about among the camps at will; but that reminds me that I have not seen him to-day," the landlord said.

"Is he the one the girl is coming to see?" asked Doctor Dick.

"Yes, and his name is Bernard Brandon."

"He came out here on a special mission for her, I suppose to find her father, and not hearing from him she feared that he had gotten into trouble, so came West herself in search of him."

"Well, her coming may bring back his reason, though I doubt it."

"Will you not question him, doctor, telling him about her, and see if you cannot get him to talk rationally?"

"Certainly, Harding, but where is he?"

Landlord Larry asked his clerk about the man, but he had not seen him all day, and the miner being questioned not one recalled having seen him since the day before.

In some dread that harm had befallen him, Harding then went out in search of the poor fellow.

He went from miner to miner and camp to camp in his vain search for the missing man, for not anywhere could he find any one who had seen him for over twenty-four hours.

Becoming really alarmed, when he realized the shock it would be to Celeste Seldon, whose hazardous and costly trip to the West would be utterly useless, Harding went back to the hotel to consult Doctor Dick and Landlord Larry about giving a general alarm.

Then alarms were only given in times of direct need, for the miners were sworn to obey the call, and come from every camp and mine within the circuit of habitation about Last Chance.

The alarm was given by sending a mounted bugler to every prominent point in the valley, where he was to sound the rally three times.

A half-dozen positions thus visited would send the bugle-notes into every camp of the valley, and it was the duty of all miners to at once strike for the place of assembly at the hotel, and give the warning to all others whom they saw.

Landlord Larry hearing the story of Harding's fruitless search for the stranger, at once decided to order the alarm sounded without consulting Doctor Dick, who was not at his cabin.

So the bugler was called in, and mounting a speedy horse, he placed the bugle to his lips and loud, clear and ringing resounded the "rally."

Then he dashed from point to point at the full speed of his horse, and within half an hour, from half a dozen prominent positions, the bugle-call assembling the miners had rung out and men were hastening to obey the summons.

CHAPTER XL.

AN UNKNOWN FATE.

THE bugle-call sent the miners from every point hastening to the hotel, and within an hour every man in Last Chance had reported at the assembling point, all eager to know the cause of the alarm.

Again Landlord Larry was the speaker, and he began by asking if the unfortunate stranger, whose wound had crazed him, was in the crowd.

Every eye was at once on the search for the man, but soon the reports came that Bernard Brandon was not in the crowd.

Then Landlord Larry made known that the mysterious disappearance, at the time of Miss Seldon's capture by the road-agents, was a coincidence so strange that it needed explanation.

Miss Seldon was coming to Last Chance to find that very young man, who had in turn come there in search of her father, and now, when she was a captive to the road-agents, to be given up only upon the payment of a large ransom, the stranger had most mysteriously disappeared.

The name of the young lady's father was Andrew Seldon, and if any miner present could tell aught regarding him, or had known such a man, the landlord wished him to come and tell him all that he could about him.

But it was the duty, and but justice, for one and all of them to set out on the search for the young stranger who had disappeared from their midst, and he wished to know if they would not take a day off and do so, for it might be that he had fallen and broken his leg, and was then lying suffering and deserving their sympathy and aid somewhere among the mountains.

A perfect yell in answer to the request of Landlord Larry, told him that Bernard Brandon would be found if he was in or near Last Chance, and so it was agreed that all would start at dawn the following morning, many mounted, many on foot, and report the result, if good or bad, at the hotel at night.

So the miners' meeting broke up, and with the first gray in the East the following morning, four-fifths of Last Chance were off, searching for the missing man.

As they wore themselves out, or completed the search over the circuit assigned them, the men came in and reported at the hotel.

Toward sunset the men began to come in rapidly and each had the same story to tell, that the search had been a fruitless one.

Many of the mounted men did not come in until after dark, but theirs was the same story, that no trace of the missing stranger could be found.

At last every man who had been on the search had returned, and not the slightest trace of the missing Brandon had been discovered by a single one who had gone out to look for him.

No one remembered to have seen him very lately, and so his fate was unsolved, and the miners put it down as unknown, with the belief that he had either been kidnapped by road-agents or had fallen into some stream, or from a cliff, and thus met his death.

The belief of Landlord Larry and Harding was that Bernard Brandon had been captured, for some reason, by road-agents, and this convinced them that there were spies of the outlaws then dwelling in their midst; but what the motive for kidnapping the man was, they could only conjecture, believing it to be ransom that they thought the miners would pay, and if they did not, that Celeste Seldon would.

This belief, of spies in their midst, caused a very unpleasant and uneasy feeling among all, for hardly any man knew whether he could trust his own comrade or not.

Doctor Dick came in late from his search, and rounds to visit his patients, and listened in silence to the report that Bernard Brandon could not be found.

He, however, would not believe that road-agents had kidnapped the crazed man, but said that he might have sprung from the cliff and taken his own life, have fallen over a precipice, or been devoured by the fierce mountain wolves that hung in packs about the camps.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE OUTLAWS' CAPTIVE.

IT was with a sinking heart that Celeste Seldon saw Harding drive away upon the stage, leaving her in the power of the road-agents.

But she was a brave girl, and determined to show the outlaws that she did not fear them, no matter how great her dread of them was in reality.

The saddle and bridle she had brought with her were carried along for a couple of miles, and placed upon a led horse, one of half a score hidden there, and the masked chief started to aid her to mount.

But she said with a sneer:

"I need no assistance from you."

With this she placed her hands upon the horn and leaped lightly into the saddle.

Her leather trunk was then strapped securely upon a pack-saddle, and the chief said:

"Now, Miss Seldon, that you and my men are mounted we will start."

She turned her horse on the trail behind him, and the other outlaws followed, all riding in Indian file and with several pack-horses bringing up the rear.

After a ride of a dozen miles a halt was made for a rest, the chief said, and then Celeste Seldon observed that the hoofs of every horse were muffled, to prevent their leaving a trail.

Having been left something over a couple of miles from the scene of the holding up of the stage, it would be next to impossible for the best of trailers to discover which way the road-agents had come to the spot and left it, for the chief's muffled-hoofed horse would leave no track to where the other animals were.

Tired out and anxious, Celeste Seldon, after eating sparingly of the food given her by the chief, sat down with her back to a tree and closing her eyes dropped into a deep sleep.

When she was awakened to continue the journey she found that she had slept an hour.

"We are ready to go, miss," said the man who had appeared to be the chief's lieutenant, and whom he had called Wolf, whether because it was his real name, or on account of his wolfish nature, Celeste did not know.

"I am ready," she said, simply, refreshed by her short nap.

"Shall I aid you to mount, miss?"

"No, I can mount without your aid; but where is your chief?"

"He has gone on ahead, miss, to prepare for your coming, leaving me to escort you."

"I am content, for one is as bad as the other," was the reply, and leaping into her saddle again she fell in behind the man Wolf, and the march was again begun.

Night came on, but the outlaws rode on for an hour or more, when they halted at a small spring in a thicket of *pinons*.

Celeste was made more comfortable in a shelter of boughs, hastily cut and thrown up, and when supper was ready she ate heartily of antelope-steak, crackers and coffee.

She was rather glad to have got rid of the masked chief, of whom she stood in the greatest awe, and Wolf never spoke to her unless she addressed some remark to him.

When she lay down upon the blanket-bed, spread upon fine straw, which he had made for her, she sunk at once to sleep.

She had no thought of escape enter her mind, for what could she do there alone in that wild, trackless land?

She would bide her time and await the result, be it what it might.

She was awakened early in the morning, and the march was at once begun again, a halt being made a couple of hours after for breakfast.

While it was being prepared she was allowed to wander at will, Wolf calling her only when it was ready, and thus showing that they had not the slightest idea that she would do so foolish a thing as to escape from them, to perish in the wilderness or meet death by being attacked by wild

When the start was again made, Wolf said:

"When we halt for our noon camp, miss, I will have to blindfold you, and bind your hands."

"Ah! you consider me very dangerous then?" she said with a smile.

"You doubtless are dangerous, miss, in more ways than one; but it is to prevent your seeing where we take you, that you are to be blindfolded."

"Do you think I could guide a party after you?"

"You have the nerve to do it, miss."

"But why bind my hands?"

"To prevent your removing the bandage from your eyes, miss."

"I will pledge you my word that I will not do so."

"I believe you would keep your word, miss; but the chief is a man who is merciless, and his orders were to blindfold and bind you, and if I disobey he would shoot me down as though I were in reality a wolf."

"Perhaps not much loss, but I will submit," said Celeste with a sigh, for she had enjoyed the scenery, and her freedom as well thus far, and now must be both blindfolded and bound.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE TWO FUGITIVES.

It will be remembered by the reader that when Buffalo Bill and Doctor Dick rode away from the caved-in mine and crushed cabin of the two gold-hunters in the Grand Canyon, there were human eyes following their movements that they little dreamed were upon them.

Gazing at them from a hiding-place half a mile away were two men whose faces showed much anxiety as they saw the scout and the Gold King moving about their quarters, when they had believed themselves hidden from all search by friend or foe.

Those two were Andrew Seldon and Lucas Langley.

Their escape had been miraculous, from being buried in the mine beneath the cliff, and they had established for themselves new quarters up the Grand Canyon a few miles away from their former home.

This new camping-place was more secluded than the former one, and approached by a narrow ridge that no one would believe a horse could pass along, for in places it was but eighteen inches wide.

But Andrew Seldon had gone first along it on foot, and found beyond, up in the depths of a large canyon opening into the mightier one, a perfect garden spot and scene of beauty.

A crystal stream trickled down a lofty precipice and flowed through the canyon, and in its bed glittered grains of gold innumerable.

Back under the shadows of the towering cliffs there were found veins of precious metal giving promise of rich mines.

There were trees growing luxuriantly in this Nature's Park, velvety grass covering acres of meadow land, wild fruits that were delicious and everything to make this home a most charming one.

They first made the effort get their horses across the narrow ridge, upon either side of which was an abyss a quarter of a mile in depth, seamed with ravines, and looking like the craters of defunct volcanoes.

The first horse tried, Andrew Seldon's own riding animal, followed his master without hesitation along the dizzy, awful pathway.

Turning, Andrew Seldon led him back again, and then the other animals followed slowly, and though nervously, yet without accident.

They were repaid for their fright when turned loose upon the acres of luxuriant grass in the valley.

A fence of poles made a barrier across the narrow entrance of the valley, and the horses were allowed to roam at will.

A stout cabin was next built, and the two men having made themselves comfortable for the winter, were ready to begin their search for gold, feeling safe once more in their retreat, for who would believe that they had crossed that narrow ridge to find a hiding-place beyond?

And here these two men, so strangely met, with mysterious lives, and both in hiding

from the world, settled down to win a fortune from the generous earth, to earn riches that would make them comfortable in their latter years far from the scenes that had known them in other days and to which they dared not return.

Each day they worked several hours in their gold-hunting, and then one of them would take his gun and go in search of game, while the other would do the chores about their cabin.

It was upon one of these hunting expeditions one day that Andrew Seldon found himself belated from having pursued his game much further than he had thought.

It was some miles back to camp and the sun had long since ceased to send its rays down into the depths of the mighty chasm of the Grand Canyon.

He started back, with his game swung upon his back, and the shadows rapidly deepening about him.

As he neared his old destroyed home he stopped suddenly, for across the canyon a light flashed before his gaze.

"It is a firelight as sure as I live," he muttered.

"What does it, what can it mean?"

He stood like one dazed by the sight for some time and then slowly fell from his lips the words:

"It can mean but one thing—that some one has come into the canyon."

After a moment more of silent thought he said almost cheerily:

"Ah! it is Lucas."

But again his voice changed as he added:

"No, he dreads the spot where he was so nearly buried alive and will not go there."

"Whoever it is, he is a stranger."

"I must know, for if they have come here to remain, if they are our foes we will be forewarned and hence forearmed."

"I will at once solve the mystery, for I had hoped never to behold a human face here other than Lucas Langley's and my own," and the gold-hunter walked away in the direction of the firelight which had so startled him.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE STRANGE LIGHT.

ANDREW SELDON went cautiously on his way toward the strange light which had attracted his attention.

He knew well the danger if he was discovered, and the builders of the camp-fire proved to be foes.

He knew the locality well, and that he could approach within a hundred yards of the fire, and discover just what there was to be seen.

Arriving within an eighth of a mile of the spot he halted, laid aside his game and rifle, and then moved forward from rock to rock, tree to tree, armed only with his revolvers.

He now saw that there were three fires, two near together and one a couple of hundred feet apart and off to itself.

The scene of the camp was a small canyon near his old home and on the trail leading to it.

There was gold in the canyon, for he had discovered it there and taken some away, while he had marked it as his claim, it having been already staked as one of the finds and claims of the real Andrew Seldon.

In truth there were a dozen such claims in the Grand Canyon found by Andrew Seldon, all of them paying finds.

Having reached a point within a hundred yards of the camp-fires, Andrew Seldon leant over a rock and began to survey the scene.

The three fires were burning brightly, and beyond the light fell upon a number of horses corralled in the canyon, where there was grass and water.

There were brush shelters near, three in number, and about the fires in front of them were gathered a number of men.

Counting them, Andrew Seldon found that there were eight in sight.

There appeared to be no guard kept, and the camp was certainly not a very new one, apparently having been made there several weeks before.

Emboldened by his discovery, the gold-hunter crept nearer and nearer, and then

This struck him as being a very remarkable circumstance indeed.

They were clad like miners, some of them wearing beads that came below their masks, and all were armed thoroughly.

They were eating their supper as Andrew Seldon looked at them.

Gaining a point of observation still nearer, the gold-hunter obtained a view of the camp-fire apart from the others.

A comfortable little cabin was just behind the fire, and a rustic bench had been made near it.

A blanket hung over the door of the tiny cabin, and about the fire was the evidence of a supper recently eaten, for a cup, tin-plate and knives, with the remains of a meal, were upon a rock that served as a table.

Upon the rustic seat sat one whose presence there was a great surprise to Andrew Seldon.

"By Heaven, it is a woman!" he almost cried aloud in his amazement.

Then he determined to get a still nearer view, and after surveying the position, he decided that he could do so by passing around to the edge of the cliff and creeping along it to a point not sixty feet away.

As he, after very cautious work, reached the point he sought, some forty feet from the one at the camp-fire, gazing upon her he muttered to himself:

"It is a young and beautiful girl, and why is she here with those strange men?"

"Who is she, and what is this mystery?"

"I must solve it."

He noted that the single fire was just around a bend of the canyon, and that the men were camped below her.

"This looks as though she was a prisoner."

"But how did they find this spot, and how dare they venture down that dangerous trail?"

"Well, Andrew Seldon the real did it, I did it, Lucas Langley also, and Buffalo Bill and the comrade with him were two more to make the venture, so why not these men?"

"But why are they masked, and what does it mean that they have that young girl in their midst?"

"Beyond doubt she is a captive, and yet I dare not communicate with her."

"It would betray my presence and I would lose all, perhaps my life."

"They do not know of my presence here in the Grand Canyon, and they will hardly find our camp, at least as long as they find gold where they are."

"Well, I will return to my home and tell Langley of my strange discovery."

After so musing, and gazing the while at the young girl, Andrew Seldon was about to leave his position, when he saw a horseman ride into the lower camp.

His horse seemed to have been hard ridden, for he came in with lowered head, and that the new-comer was in authority there was shown by the men rising as he approached the fire, while one of them took care of his horse.

"I will see what this arrival means," muttered Andrew Seldon and he kept his position among the rocks.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE OUTLAW LOVER.

THE man who had ridden into camp gave some order, which Andrew Seldon could not hear, and one of those about the camp-fire at once set about preparing supper for him.

There was upon his face a red mask, much as the others wore, but he was dressed in somewhat better style than they, wearing cavalry boots instead of heavy ones such as his men had on, while his body dress was a velvet jacket.

His hat was a slouch, encircled by a silver cord representing a snake, as the gold-hunter discovered, when he afterward got a closer view of him.

He talked to his men for a few minutes, but what he said the gold-hunter was unable to hear.

Then he walked away, coming in the direction of the other fire.

"Now I can know what this means," muttered Andrew Seldon eagerly.

The young girl had certainly seen the man arrive in camp, but she had shown no interest apparently in his coming, and now, as he approached, she calmly remained seated, her eyes however following his movements.

As he drew near he politely raised his sombrero and said:

"I hope I find Miss Seldon well?"

"Seldon! She bears the name I now am masquerading under," muttered the gold-hunter in intense surprise.

"Miss Seldon is as well as could be expected under the existing circumstances, of being the captive of a band of cut-throats," was the cutting reply, and Andrew Seldon, who heard all, opened wide his eyes.

"You are harsh in your terms, Miss Seldon."

"Are you not road-agents, robbers and murderers, and are you not holding me here for ransom, after having robbed me of a large sum in my keeping?"

"Yes, such is the case."

"Then why wince under the name of cut-throat? But you have been away for some days?"

"I have."

"You have seen your chief?"

"I have."

"And what message does he send?"

"You are to go with me at dawn to the rendezvous on the Overland Trail, where you are to be given over to the one sent by the miners of Last Chance to pay your ransom."

"I am glad of this; but will your chief keep faith, or will he play the traitor for a third time and escape giving me up through some trick?"

"No, for if he did he would surely be run down, as he knows, by the miners, even if your life was the forfeit."

"I hope it may prove true that I am to be ransomed, and I will be ready to go with you; but where is your chief?"

"He is in his other camp."

"Then he has two?"

"Yes."

"Am I to be blindfolded and bound again when you are taking me from here?"

"Such are his orders, Miss Seldon."

"He fears that I, a young girl, may lead a force upon his secret retreat?"

"That is just what he fears, Miss Seldon."

"I only wish I was able to do so."

"Miss Seldon, may I speak a word to you?" suddenly said the masked outlaw drawing nearer.

"I believe there is no more to say, for I will be ready at the hour you desire to start."

"There is more to say, and say it I will."

"I wish to tell you that I have been a very wicked man, that I went to the bad when hardly out of my teens, broke my mother's heart by my evil life, and ruined my father financially, driving him to suicide in his despair."

"I came West and tried to redeem the past by becoming an honest miner; but luck went against me and I at last turned once more to evil and found a band of outlaws."

"Money came to me in plenty, and at last I drifted into the band that our chief commands, and, as you know, I am his lieutenant."

"He found this mine and sent us here to work it and have our retreat here also. Much gold is coming to us through our work, and also by our holding up the coaches on the Last Chance trail, for he posts us where to be on hand for an attack, as we have what we call the Post Office half way between our camp and his."

"When he made you a prisoner I felt for you, and as I was the one to hold you captive and bring you here, I grew more and more fond of you until now I must, I will tell you, that I love you with my whole heart and soul, Celeste Seldon."

The young girl had not moved during the time that the outlaw lieutenant was speaking, but now when he proclaimed his love for her she arose, drew herself up and said haughtily:

"And I, Celeste Seldon, abhor such love as you, an outlaw, would feel for me, and command you not again to speak one word to me while I am in the hateful atmosphere of your presence as your prisoner."

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SECRET OUT.

"CELESTE SELDON! It was *her* name—his daughter's name, and yet the letter said that she was dead!"

"Is this a coincidence, or is she alive, and is this young girl the child of Andrew Seldon the real?"

So mused Andrew Seldon the impersonator, as he crouched among the rocks, his eyes riveted upon the girl not fifty feet from him, and who so boldly faced the outlaw officer who had dared breathe to her a word of love.

The outlaw stood abashed at the manner in which his avowal of love had been received.

There was no anger in his look, and he seemed hurt rather than offended.

After Celeste Seldon's indignant response to him he half turned away, as though to retire in silence, but then reconsidered his determination and said in a low tone full of feeling:

"Pardon me, for I did wrong to think for a moment that an angel would look kindly upon a devil."

"I loved you, and I could not but tell you of it, for you had decided me as to my own course, you had made me see my evil life as it is in all its enormity and decide to make another struggle to go back to honor and truth."

"This at least you deserve credit for, and I trust you may carry out your resolve, for in that you shall have my full sympathy."

"Thank you, Miss Seldon; but I have something more to say to you."

"Well, sir?"

"You are to be given up by the chief on the payment of your ransom?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could prevent this robbery, but I cannot, as it is simply beyond my power to do so."

"I do not ask it of you."

"Granted; but your being returned will not end it all."

"How do you mean?"

"You came here for an avowed purpose, as I understand it."

"I did, Mr. Wolf."

"That purpose was to find one who had come West on a special mission."

"Granted again."

"His mission was to find your father, Andrew Seldon."

The listener crouching among the rocks started at this and set his teeth hard, while he awaited the reply of the young girl.

"Yes; he came to find my father, Andrew Seldon, who, I had reason to believe, was in the mining country about here."

"You have not heard of the young man who came at your bidding?"

"Let me say that he came of his own accord, knowing that a great wrong had been done my father, by one whom he believed his dearest friend."

"He came to find him and tell him all the sad truth; but why am I telling *you* this?"

"Because you know that I am interested, that I can aid you."

"Can you?" was the eager reply.

"I can."

"Do so, and—"

"And what?"

"I will reward you—generously."

"I seek no reward, ask for none, would not accept any pay at your hands, other than to earn your good opinion and gratitude."

"Well, sir?" said Celeste Seldon, coolly.

"Have you found your father?"

"No, I regret to say I have not; but I was interrupted in my search by being captured by your robber chief."

"Do you know what became of the young man who came West in search of him?"

"I had a letter mailed at W—— from him, stating that he had heard of people at Last Chance who might tell him of my father, and that he was going there, and would at once communicate with me."

"I had no other letter, and my communications remained unanswered, even my telegrams which I sent to Santa Fe and mailed there brought no response."

"Then I decided to come out here myself, and I acted promptly."

"And you have not found the one you seek?"

"I have discovered that the coach in which he left W—— was held up by your band, that he was wounded, and that though he was placed under the care of one known as Doctor Dick, and really a fine surgeon, though his life was saved, his reason was gone, and now he is wandering about the mines of Last Chance a harmless lunatic."

"He was, until lately."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he was kidnapped several days ago."

"Kidnapped?"

"Yes, Miss Seldon."

"For what purpose?"

"Ransom."

"By whom?"

"My chief."

"Ah! but what ransom can he get from him?"

"I believe you told the chief that you were rich, and this poor fellow is your messenger."

"I think I understand."

"Yes, you will be returned and then negotiations will be entered into for your messenger's ransom."

"Ah! I am to be still further robbed?" said Celeste with a sneer.

"Yes, and that is not the end," came the significant reply.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE THIRD DEMAND.

THERE was something in the response of the outlaw officer that impressed the young girl most strangely.

What more could there be in store for her, than she had already passed through, which caused him to say that the end was not yet?

The listener among the rocks kept his eyes riveted upon the two, his ears turned to catch every word they uttered.

He now knew that the letter he had received, telling him, as Andrew Seldon, that Celeste the daughter was dead, was false, and a fraud perpetrated for some reason upon the absent miner.

He saw before him the girl whom, as her pretended father, he would claim as his own.

Andrew had long been from home, and when he left, Celeste was a mere child.

Would she recognize him as a fraud, not as her own father?

She had said she was rich, so would it be necessary for him to share with her, now that he knew that she was alive, the riches he was earning in the mines which he had found through her father's maps and directions?

Such thoughts flashed through the mind of the gold-hunter, to be at once dismissed, and then he awaited for more to be said.

"You say that the ransom of Bernard Brandon will not be the end?" asked Celeste after a moment of meditation.

"It will not."

"What else can there be?"

"A great deal."

"What do you mean?"

"There will be a *third demand*."

"How?"

"Upon you."

"For what?"

"Gold."

"By whom?"

"The chief."

"What will the demand be for?"

"I'd tell you the truth, as I happen to know it, or rather suspect it, from what I do know, have seen and heard."

"I hope that you will act squarely with me, Mr. Wolf."

"Upon my life, I will, and though I cannot help you now, must even appear to be your foe, in the end I will help you and prove to be your friend."

"I hope so."

"You ask what this third demand will be?"

"Yes."

"Will you ransom Bernard Brandon?"

"Where is he?"

"A fugitive."

"Where?"

"He will be in this camp to-morrow."

"Ah! then I will see him?"

"No; he will not arrive until after your departure."

"I will await his coming."

"That cannot be, for I have orders to start with you to be ransomed, and you are not supposed to know that he has been captured."

"But you have told me so."

"It was a confidential communication, and if you betray me I can render you no further service, for my usefulness will be gone; in fact, I would be put to death."

"I will not betray you."

"Thank you; but let me say that Brandon will be brought here, for two men now have him in charge, and are on the trail here."

"Yes."

"You will be ransomed, and then go to Last Chance."

"There you will learn of Brandon's mysterious disappearance, and a ransom will soon after be demanded for him."

"Yes."

"You will pay it?"

"Of course I will."

"Then comes the third trial."

"What is it?"

"You will be captured!"

"Ah!"

"It is true."

"By whom?"

"The masked chief of The Cloven Hoofs of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado."

"He will still hunt me down?"

"He will."

"Being forewarned is being forearmed."

"Not in this case."

"Why so?"

"He works in a most mysterious way, and do all you may you will be captured by him."

"And another ransom demanded?"

"Yes."

"And so he will continue to rob me of my gold."

"In this case the ransom will not be of gold."

"I do not understand."

"The ransom demanded will be your hand in marriage."

Celeste uttered a cry of alarm and started back with a look of horror upon her beautiful face.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE DEPARTURE.

THE reply of the outlaw officer, telling what the third demand to be made upon Celeste Seldon would be, caused her face to pale and her lips quiver, while her eyes burned brightly with indignation.

She stood for a moment in silence and then asked:

"Do you mean that he will make this demand upon me?"

"I mean that the demand will be made upon you by one who will enforce it."

"Who?"

"That I cannot tell you, more I cannot say to you, yet I will relieve your anxiety by saying that I will protect you, cost whose life it may."

"You?"

"Yes, if you are again captured; though, if I can prevent it I will."

"But if I am?"

"It will end there, for then I will prove my reformation: I will protect you, and that poor fellow for whom you will have to pay ransom."

"When I do, I believe I will be able to return your gold, paid in ransom, to you again."

"But, whether I do or not, you will go your way free, and Brandon also, and I will prove that you have reformed me, that my loving you has made me a different man."

"Now I cannot, will not say more; but remember that through all I will secretly be your friend, though openly appearing as your guard and enemy."

"I thank you, and I will trust you," and stepping forward Celeste Seldon held forth her hand.

The man put forth his own as though to grasp it, then hesitated and said:

"No, I will prove my reformation, my friendship before I touch you with my crime-stained hand."

"I will call you at an early hour," and

turning abruptly the outlaw lover of Celeste Seldon walked away.

Resuming her seat the young girl became lost in thought, while Andrew Seldon, after gazing at her for a few moments in silence, turned away from his hiding-place and crept cautiously back to where he had left his game and rifle.

He knew that his comrade would be most anxious about him, yet he determined to remain there for the night and see the departure in the morning.

He would then know just how many outlaws went with Celeste Seldon as a guard, and how many remained.

So he made himself as comfortable as possible and sunk to sleep.

He awoke an hour before dawn and saw the camp-fires burning brightly.

Creeping to the safest point of observation, from which he could retreat unseen after daylight, should any of the outlaws remain in their camp, he waited for developments.

He had not long to wait before he saw a party approaching on horseback.

There was one in the lead, and as he came within a few yards of where he lay, Andrew Seldon recognized the outlaw officer, Wolf.

He held a lariat in his hand that was attached to the bit of the horse following, and upon which was mounted Celeste Seldon.

In the dim gray of early dawn Seldon saw that the eyes of Celeste were blindfolded, and her hands rested in her lap as though bound.

Behind her came in single file five outlaws, and like their leader, they were masked.

Bringing up the rear were a couple of pack-horses well laden.

The party passed on and then Andrew Seldon turned his attention to the outlaw camp, in which several of the men had been left.

Having discovered this, Seldon then crept cautiously back, picked up his rifle and game and started off at a double-quick for his own camp, anxious to relieve his pard's anxiety regarding him, and to tell him all that he had discovered.

CHAPTER XLIX.

RISKING RECOGNITION.

A MAN of great endurance Andrew Seldon made a rapid run to his home, and did not feel it in the least.

He found Lucas Langley just starting off on a search for him and the welcome he received was a sincere one.

"How glad I am to see you, Pard Seldon."

"Surely you were not lost?" he said.

"No, indeed; but have you any breakfast, for I am as ravenous as a wolf, as I went without dinner and supper yesterday and did not delay to cook anything this morning."

"You shall have something in a few minutes, so wash up and I'll get it for you."

"And then we must have a talk," said Seldon, as he went down toward the little stream for a refreshing plunge bath.

"He has had an adventure of some kind I am sure," muttered Lucas Langley, as he threw a fine steak upon the coals and put some fresh coffee in the pot.

Andrew Seldon's bath greatly refreshed him, and he ate his breakfast quietly, after which he said:

"We'll not go gold-hunting to-day, pard, for I have something to tell you."

"I feel that you have seen some one in the Grand Canyon."

"You are right, I have."

"Are they here to stay?"

"Yes, they think so."

"Who are they?"

"They are masked men, outlaws, belonging, I feel sure, to the road-agent band I heard of when at W—."

"They go masked in camp?"

"They do."

"How many?"

"There are, I think, nearly a dozen of them."

"Tell me of them, and where they are?"

"They are camped in the blue cliff canyon near our old home, and are working the mine we marked as Number Two on our map."

"They are here for gold then?"

"Yes, gold-diggers in their idle moments, and at other times road-agents, making their retreat here where they deem themselves safe."

"They did not see you?"

"No, indeed; but I got within fifty feet of one of their camp-fires, and where they had a captive."

"Ah! a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Did you know him?"

"It was a young girl."

"The devils!"

"That is what they are indeed; but let me tell you just what I discovered, overheard and saw."

Then Andrew Seldon told the story as the reader is acquainted with it, and in Lucas Langley he found a most ready listener.

"Oh that we could rescue that young girl!" said Lucas Langley, when he had heard all.

"To make the attempt would be but to meet with signal failure now, Lucas."

"I fear so."

"Still I will see that they are not left long to carry on their work of devilry."

"I am with you heart and soul."

"I know that well, pard."

"But they will return the girl for the ransom demanded, and then they will get the amount they claim for the young man they spoke of."

"Yes."

"This will take some days, and in that time I shall act."

"You?"

"Yes, they will lay their plans to kidnap the girl from Last Chance, to carry out this scheme of the chief to have his third demand come in, and right there I shall thwart them."

"But how can you?"

"I will start to-night for Fort Faraway."

"Will you go there?"

"Yes."

"You told me that there were reasons why you would not go anywhere among those who might recognize you."

"It is different now, and necessity demands that I take the risk."

"I have changed greatly, for my long hair and beard, my glasses and other changes completely disguise me from what I was, and so I will go to Fort Faraway."

"For what purpose?"

"I wish to see Buffalo Bill and place these facts before him, for we can tell him where to find the outlaws, secret retreat, and I believe that the girl and the young man can be saved and every member of the robber band captured."

"It would be a grand thing for you to do."

"Yes, it is just what I wish to do, to render some valuable service to the Government."

"When shall we start?"

"I will start to-night, but you, pard, must remain here in possession of our mines."

"As you wish, pard; but will you be gone long?"

"Not a day longer than is necessary, pard."

"Well, success go with you," was Lucas Langley's response, and the two men began to make preparations for the start of the one with information of where the retreat of the outlaw band could be found.

Andrew Seldon did not care to take a pack-horse, for he wished to make all the time possible, and when the sun went down he was ready for the trail, and, with Lucas Langley accompanying him he started down the canyon to steal by the robbers' camp.

CHAPTER L.

THE LONE TRAIL.

WELL supplied with food and ammunition, having plenty of blankets along, for the nights were cold, and mounted upon the best one of their horses, Andrew Seldon felt ready to cope with whatever he might have to encounter in the way of hardships and dangers.

Mufflers had been prepared for the hoofs of his horse, that he might leave no trail, and make no sound in passing the robber

camp, while a muzzle was carried for the nose of the animal to prevent his neighing and thus betraying his presence to foes.

After crossing the narrow ridge the muffers and muzzle were tied on and the two men stole along, leading the horse, until they came in sight of the camp-fires.

But two were burning now, and about them only a few men were visible.

The two men slipped by unseen with their horse, some eighth of a mile distant from the camp, and having seen his pard in safety, Lucas Langley bade him farewell, with many good wishes for his success, and started upon his return.

Mounting then, Andrew Seldon set off on his lonely and perilous mission.

He ascended the hazardous trail, stripped his horse of his trappings upon reaching the deadly cliff which he had to pass around, and got safely by with the animal. Then he brought his saddle and trappings around, led the horse to the top of the canyon rim, and mounting, set off for Fort Faraway, taking the trail that must lead him by the deserted camp where he had killed Black Heart Bill in a duel, and where the desperado rested in his grave after his tumultuous life of evil.

By rapid riding he reached the deserted camp soon after midnight, and dismounting, prepared to go into camp.

There was the best of water and grass there, and to be merciful to his horse, Andrew Seldon did not allow his own feelings to cause him to camp elsewhere, when the animal would be the sufferer.

Having watered his horse and staked him out to feed, he sat down upon a log near the wicky-up and ate his cold supper quietly.

Then he lighted his pipe and began to smoke with a strange calmness of mien, when it is remembered that there, within a few yards of him, at the base of the quaking aspen whose white trunk looked ghostly in the moonlight, was the grave of the man he had killed, the man who had been his boyhood friend, and afterward his bitterest foe.

Laying aside his pipe, he spread his blankets in the wicky-up and then walked quietly toward the quaking aspen.

There was the mound that marked the last resting-place of Hugh Mayhew, whose deeds of wickedness had won for him the name of Black Heart Bill.

What thoughts crowded upon him as he stood there gazing upon the little mound of earth, knowing that but a few feet below the surface the dead face of his one-time friend was upturned toward him, who can tell.

For some time he stood there, his arms folded upon his broad breast, and his head bowed.

At last a sigh found its way between his set teeth and he turned away.

Reaching the wicky-up he paused and mused aloud:

"Well, I am making a bold venture to dare go to the fort from which I fled on the day appointed for my execution, fled to live on here in the wilderness, believed to be dead, yet living, my own name cast aside and living under that of one I never knew in life.

"How strange this life is, its bitterness, sorrows, realities and romance, and how strange indeed has been my career.

"Well, what will the end be, I wonder.

"I am taking my life in my hands to venture to the fort, but I must save that poor girl, run down those outlaws, and I can only do it though Buffalo Bill.

"Now to turn in, for I must get some rest, and will, even in this weird spot."

CHAPTER LI.

TO WELCOME THE FAIR GUEST.

THE miners of Last Chance were too much excited, over the expected ransom of Celeste Seldon, and the thought of soon having a young and beautiful girl in the mining-camps, to devote themselves to steady work, after the situation was known to them.

Then, too, they were greatly disturbed at the mysterious disappearance of Bernard Brandon, the young man whose mind had been destroyed by his wound, and which they could not comprehend, for not the

slightest trace had been found of him with all their searching.

The fact that they had been robbed, and also Celeste Seldon, was another disturbing element, and so it was that little work was done in the mines during the time following Harding's arrival and making known the story, and the day set for Doctor Dick to go out with the ransom money for the young girl whom they all so longed to welcome in their frontier home.

Landlord Larry had set the example of having things spruced up for her coming, and the miners had quickly followed his example, having put their cabins in better condition.

A cabin which the landlord was having built for his own especial use, apart from the hotel, was hastened to completion, and then the very best the hotel could supply was put in it as furniture and to make it attractive to the fair visitor, who was to be regarded as the guest of Last Chance.

At last the eventful day arrived for the ransom to be paid, and the miners had all taken a peep into the quarters of Celeste Seldon to see how attractive it was.

Doctor Dick had furnished a number of things to make the cabin attractive, and the miners that had any pretty robes, or souvenirs, did likewise until it would have been a callous heart indeed that would not be touched by their devotion to one whom they had never seen.

The question of an attempt to capture the road-agents had been fully discussed, but dismissed upon the advice of Landlord Larry, Doctor Dick and Harding, who represented the danger that the Young girl would be in, at the hands of the merciless masked chief.

That Doctor Dick was the right man to send out with the ransom all felt assured, for if there was any trickery on the part of the road-agents he was the one to meet it.

Doctor Dick had even offered to go out upon horseback alone, but it was thought best that the coach should be sent for the visitor and Harding should drive, he having met her.

The miners however arranged to meet her with a delegation at the entrance to the valley, and escort her to the hotel, when all not of the escort should receive her with shouts of welcome.

Every man was to be dressed in his best, and in honor of the occasion the saloons were to be all closed, so that no one would get off his base and shock her.

When at last the day arrived Harding mounted his box and gathered up his reins, Doctor Dick following to a seat by his side a moment after.

The bag containing the gold to be paid in ransom, was placed between their feet, Landlord Larry gave the word to go, and the coach rolled away at a rapid pace, followed by the wildest cheering.

The doctor was fixed up in his most magnificent attire, his jewels shone with more than accustomed luster and there was an expression upon his face that boded no good for the road-agents if they meant treachery in their dealings.

Harding was also rigged out in his finest, and wore a pleased look at the prospect of meeting Celeste again, upon whom he considered that he held a special claim, and yet underlying all was an anxiety that some hitch might occur in gaining her release that would destroy all prospect of seeing her.

The coach had been cleaned up to look its best, and a United States flag floated from a staff fastened upon the rear.

The harnesses had been burnished up to look their best, and red, white and blue streamers had been attached to the bridles, so that the whole outfit presented a very gorgeous appearance, and one intended to impress the beholder with the grandeur of the occasion.

And so it was that Doctor Dick went out with the ransom for Celeste Seldon, with Harding proud at holding the reins over the picked team that would take her back to Last Chance.

CHAPTER LII.

THE UNSEEN SENTINEL.

"WELL, Doctor Dick, what do you think of our chances?" asked Harding, when the coach had turned out of the valley and was

fairly started upon the trail to the meeting with the masked road-agent chief.

"How do you mean our chances, Harding?"

"To get the young lady?"

"You were the one to make the terms."

"True, and I fear treachery."

"What chance is there for it?"

"We have the money."

"Yes."

"We are but two."

"Very true."

"They have the captive."

"Yes."

"And they can bring many against us."

"Also very true, Harding."

"Now, if the chief means treachery, and has his men there he can hold us up, get the ransom money, still keep possession of the girl and there it is."

"He might do so; but I hardly believe we need submit to even half a dozen outlaws, where so much is at stake."

"I'm with you, Doc, in whatever you say do."

"I know that, Pard Harding; but there is another way to look at this affair."

"How is that?"

"If those road-agents were treacherous, as you seem to fear, it would end in their utter annihilation."

"How so, Doc?"

"Why the miners would send the alarm to W— and to Fort Faraway, and we would have that splendid fellow Buffalo Bill leading a column of soldiers on the hunt for them from one point, another force would push out from W—, and a couple of hundred miners from Last Chance and every outlaw in this part of the country would be caught and hanged."

"I believe you are right, Doc."

"I had not thought of the result of treachery on their part, for they would get the worst of it; no, I guess all will go well."

"I think so and hope so sincerely," answered Doctor Dick, and the coach rolled on in silence for some time, when Harding asked:

"What do you think of Brandon's disappearance, doctor?"

"I hardly know what to think, unless he has fallen from some precipice and killed himself."

"I guess that is it; but now let me give you a warning, Doc."

"Of what?"

"That young girl."

"What have I to fear, pard?"

"If you don't fall in love with her you are a different man from what I take you to be."

"You have been caught, I see."

"Yes, I'm gone, clean gone; but I guess that is all the good it will do me, for I suppose her lover is that poor fellow Brandon."

"You only think her lovely just because she is the only woman you have seen on the frontier."

"She is doubtless as ugly as an old maid."

"Just wait and see her, and then say which of us is wrong," said Harding with a confident smile.

As the coach turned around a cliff neither Doctor Dick or Harding saw that there was a man standing among the pines watching them.

He had, from his position, been able to see the coach a mile away, as it wound along the valley, and he had watched it as it approached with seemingly the deepest interest.

He stood erect, like a soldier on duty, one hand resting upon a repeating-rifle, the other grasping a field glass, which he had occasionally raised to his eyes and viewed the coming stage.

He stood like a sentinel, and had been there for an hour or more before the coach rolled into view.

A glance was sufficient to show that the silent sentinel on the cliff was none other than Buffalo Bill, the chief of scouts.

He was dressed as was his wont, and back from the cliff a couple of hundred yards, grazing upon the ridge, was his horse.

But, strangest of all, the scout sentinel did not hail the coach, did not make his presence known, but allowed it to roll by, himself unseen, as though he wished to keep

the fact of his being there a secret, even from Doctor Dick and Harding, his ally and spy.

CHAPTER LIII.

AT THE RENDEZVOUS.

As the coach drew near the rendezvous, appointed by the masked road-agent chief at the Dead Line, Harding breathed hard with suppressed emotion.

He had really fallen in love with the beautiful girl, whom he felt he was in a manner the protector of, and he was most anxious as to the result.

Aside from his regard for Celeste Seldon, her unprotected condition would have won his deepest sympathy under any circumstances.

Doctor Dick, on the other hand, was calm and silent.

He had the money demanded, and he had come to do his duty, but was prepared to face all emergencies that might arise.

At last the scene of the tragedies came in view, the cross erected at the Dead Line was just before them, and then Harding grasped the reins expecting a summons to halt.

No one was visible in the pass, but that was no sign that there was no one there, as Harding and Doctor Dick well knew.

Just as the leaders reached the cross a voice called out:

"Halt!"

Hard went the foot of the driver upon the brake, and his hands pulled the team to a sudden stop.

Doctor Dick instinctively dropped his hand upon his revolver, but removed it instantly and calmly awaited the issue.

The coach having halted the same voice called out:

"Is there any one inside the coach?"

"No one," answered Harding.

"If you lie to me, Harding, your life will be the forfeit."

"All right, so be it, sir; but Doctor Dick and I are all that came."

"Who is following you?"

"No one."

"Did none of the miners come out from Last Chance?"

"Not one."

"You are sure?"

"I am."

"If we are attacked, both you and Doctor Dick shall die, and if the force is large enough to press me hard, I shall kill the girl."

"You need have no fear of an attack; but I only wish we dared make the attempt, for I would like to see every one of you hanged."

A laugh greeted this remark of the driver and once again the unseen road-agent called out:

"Did you bring the gold?"

"Did you bring the young lady?"

"Answer my question, Harding."

"You answer mine."

"I will reply when I have had an answer."

"If you brought the young lady, as you pledged yourself to do, you can get the ransom money; but if you did not, you will have to fight to get it."

"That is our trade; but the young lady is here."

"Then get her out of your vile company as quickly as possible."

"Where is the money?"

Before Harding could reply Doctor Dick said sternly:

"A truce to this nonsensical parleying."

"I have the money and will pay it over when the young lady is given into my charge, but not before."

"Where is she?"

The road-agent seemed impressed by the stern words of Doctor Dick and responded:

"I will go and fetch her, while you turn your coach around."

This Harding at once did, and coming to a halt again, Doctor Dick got down from the box, and the bag of gold was handed to him by Harding.

There was a wait of a few minutes, and then out from among the pines in the pass came a man, followed by Celeste Seldon, a few feet behind him.

As she approached the spot she waved her hand to Harding, and said pleasantly:

"We meet again, my good friend."

"And mighty glad am I that we do, miss."

"Permit me to introduce to you the boss man of Last Chance, Doctor Dick, and he is here with the money to pay your ransom."

Doctor Dick doffed his sombrero, bowed low, and then stepped forward as Celeste held out her hand to him, and said in his courtly way:

"I am happy in meeting Miss Seldon and receiving her in the name of the miners of Last Chance."

CHAPTER LIV.

THE EXCHANGE.

THE outlaw who accompanied Celeste was masked completely, and his form enveloped in a black robe that effectually concealed it.

He stepped toward Doctor Dick, and said: "You, sir, have the ransom money for the return of this young lady?"

"I have gold amounting to the sum demanded."

"See here, Doc, I don't see why we should be robbed by one man, so let us run him in, now we have the young lady, and we will not have to pay the gold," and Harding suddenly covered the outlaw with his revolver.

"No, no," cried Celeste:

"That will never do."

"No, Harding, we must keep faith with him, even if he be a murderer and a thief."

"Put up your gun," said Doctor Dick.

The masked outlaw had not moved at the action of Harding, but now said:

"You wisely decide, Doctor Dick, for I am no fool to be caught in a trap and I trust no man, so came prepared to meet treachery if it was intended, and this young lady will tell you that my men are within easy range, and you, Harding, in covering me with your revolver took big chances."

"I didn't believe you would come alone, and we were fools to do so, for we could have fought it out right here," grumbled the driver, greatly disappointed at his not carrying out his suddenly determined upon plot.

The road-agent then took the bag, opened it, ran over the gold like one who knew its value, and then said:

"Yes, there is the amount here, no more, no less."

"Ask Miss Seldon if she has not been treated with marked respect."

"I can but answer yes, for I have been; but am I not to have my trunk and side-saddle?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," and the road-agent gave a signal, which was promptly answered by two men appearing in the edge of the pines.

They wore long black robes and red masks also, and their appearance was proof that their leader had not come alone.

"Bring the baggage belonging to this lady, and her side-saddle and bridle also," called out the leader.

The men disappeared and Doctor Dick asked:

"Do you expect to keep up your lawless acts much longer without meeting the fate you deserve, Sir Outlaw?"

"Yes, for the money I get is worth taking big chances for, Doctor Dick, and gambler that you are, you never do a better day's work than what sum this gold calls for."

"It is a long lane that has no turn, and the turn will come for you some day," said Harding.

A light laugh beneath the mask was the answer, and Celeste Seldon's face wore a clouded expression Harding was not slow to observe.

"Then I am free to go, sir?" and Celeste turned to the outlaw.

"You are, Miss Seldon," was the answer.

She turned to the coach and Doctor Dick aided her into it, just as the two outlaws came up with the small leather trunk she had brought with her and her saddle and bridle.

Taking the back seat Celeste leaned up in one corner, as thought fatigued, and her baggage having been put on top, Dick and Harding mounted to the box, the outlaws

attentively regarding them through the eye-holes in their masks.

"Remember, pards, I still drive this trail," said the driver with an air of defiance as he gathered up the reins:

"I won't forget, Harding; but I advise you to keep in mind the story of the pitcher that went once too often to the well, for right here some day you may meet your fate."

"If I do you will not find me flinch from it," was the plucky response, and the driver called to his horses and the team moved on.

Looking back at the bend the driver and Dick Doom saw that the outlaws had already disappeared, while Celeste Seldon, gazing back also noted the same fact and murmured to herself:

"What yet is before me, I wonder?"

CHAPTER LV.

DOCTOR DICK TELLS THE NEWS.

WHEN the coach had got well away from the Dead Line, Harding gave a deep sigh of relief, for the first time feeling that Celeste was safe, and would not be retaken by the outlaws.

"Well, Doc, she's safe now, and we didn't lose our scalps," he said.

"It is a cause of congratulation all round, Harding."

"Now, Doctor Dick, you have got to tell the young lady about the poor crazy fellow."

"Did you not tell her?"

"That his wound had crazed him, yes; but that is not the worst of it."

"Ah, yes, you mean that he has been captured?"

"I cannot say that, Doc; but he has mysteriously disappeared."

"Well, you wish me to break the news to her?"

"I do, for I can't tell her what I know will hurt her, and it won't do for her to hear it from the men when she arrives in Last Chance."

"I guess you are right, pard, so draw up and I'll take a seat inside the coach and tell her the news."

"Be very gentle, Doc, for I have an idea she loves that young man."

"I'll break it to her as gently as I can," was the response, and as Harding drew rein a moment after, Doctor Dick sprung down from the box and said:

"May I ride with you, Miss Seldon?"

"Certainly, sir, if you desire."

"I have something to talk to you about," said Doctor Dick, as he entered the coach and took the front seat.

"I shall be glad to hear what you have to say, sir, and I desire now to thank you for your very great kindness toward me, while you risked your life in coming out here to serve me."

"Do not speak of it, Miss Seldon, for the miners all chipped in and made up a purse for your ransom, while they are now anxiously awaiting your coming to give you a right royal welcome, for you will be the first lady who ever came to our camp."

"Indeed! this will be an honor; but do you mean that there are none of my sex there?"

"Not one, only rough men, but with noble hearts many of them, so that you will be made to feel at once at home."

"How odd it will be, yet I have no hesitancy in going there I assure you," and Celeste gazed into the face of the man before her with both interest and admiration.

"He is strangely handsome, a manly fellow, brave, intelligent, yet a dangerous foe, and I wonder what has brought such a man as he to this far-away land?" ran her thoughts.

"Miss Seldon, what I most wished to say to you I fear will deeply pain you," said Doctor Dick, after a pause.

"Let me hear it, sir, for I am becoming accustomed to being pained of late," and Celeste was perfectly calm.

"I was told by Harding, the driver, that you were on your way to Last Chance, to look up a friend who had come here on a mission for you, and who you had feared was in trouble?"

"Yes, and my fears were realized when I learned that the coach in which he was a

passenger had been held up, I believe that is what you call it, by road-agents, and Mr. Brandon was so severely wounded in the head that his brain was turned."

"Yes, but that is not all, Miss Seldon."

"Ah! what else is there to tell?"

"He was under my care for a long while, and I did all that I could to restore his reason, except to perform an operation for his relief, which I feared to risk."

"So Mr. Harding told me."

"When his bodily health was restored he left my cabin and roamed about the camps up to a week ago when he most mysteriously disappeared."

"We had all the miners out upon a search for him, did all in our power to find him, but in vain, and what his fate has been is only conjecture."

"And what is that conjecture, Doctor Dick, for I believe you are so called?"

"Yes, I am known to all solely as Doctor Dick; but let me answer your question by replying that we believe the poor fellow has lost his life by falling over a cliff."

"Such is not the case, sir," was the reply that startled the doctor.

"Mr. Brandon is now a captive of the road-agents."

CHAPTER LXI.

DOCTOR DICK SURPRISED.

DOCTOR DICK gazed at Celeste Seldon in amazement at her reply regarding the fate of Bernard Brandon.

"Do you know this, Miss Seldon, or is it only conjecture on your part?" he asked, when he had recovered from his surprise.

He had come prepared to console, but instead had found the young girl cool and with apparently knowledge which he did not possess, regarding the man whom Harding had said he believed was her lover.

"I know it, Doctor Dick."

"May I ask how?"

"I have just been a captive of the outlaws myself, and in coming here from their secret retreat, we met two of the road-agents with a prisoner."

"The leader had some talk with them, but though I at once recognized Mr. Brandon I was not allowed to speak with him."

"Did you request it?"

"Naturally."

"But were refused?"

"Yes."

"Was any reason given?"

"Simply that I would not be allowed to, and if I did Mr. Brandon would not know me as he was crazy, while they did not care to have me do so."

"Where was this, Miss Seldon?"

"A short distance after we left their retreat."

"Could you lead the way to their retreat?"

"No, for I was blindfolded and bound miles before reaching there."

"The outlaw chief did this?"

"He was not alone, but it was done by his orders."

"Did you not speak to him of it?"

"I have not seen him since."

"Why, was not that the chief who gave you over to me to-day?"

"No, sir."

"I certainly thought so."

"It was his lieutenant, who took me to the retreat and back under his orders."

"And where is the chief?"

"At his other hiding place, his men said."

"You were well treated, I hope, Miss Seldon?"

"With perfect respect and consideration, sir, I am happy to say, the only indignity being that I was blindfolded and had my hands bound in approaching and leaving the outlaw retreat; but I suppose that was necessary for the safety of the band."

"You certainly take it most coolly."

"Why do otherwise, sir?"

"Do you know the motive of the road-agents in making that poor crazy fellow a prisoner?"

"Money."

"How do you mean?"

"They doubtless captured his baggage and discovered by its papers that went to show that a big ransom would be paid for his release."

"Ah! they will demand a ransom for him then?"

"Assuredly."

"The miners will hardly pay it if it is a large sum."

"I do not ask them to do so."

"You do not?"

"No."

"Who will pay it then?"

"I will."

"You?"

"Certainly."

"Pardon me, but you are a young girl, and—"

"A rich one nevertheless, Doctor Dick."

"I sent Mr. Brandon West on this mission, and he has met with misfortune, and I will pay the ransom demanded, take him East and place him in the care of the most eminent surgeons, that they may aid him if it is possible."

"You, as a skilled surgeon, for such I have heard you were, might tell me what you deem the chances are for his recovery?"

"Miss Seldon, the blow of that bullet caused an indenture of the skull, which might be operated upon and successfully raised so as to restore his reason."

"The chances are ninety-nine to a hundred against success, and only the most skillful surgeon and nifty one could accomplish it if done."

"Thank you; the one chance in favor shall be taken, for without reason one might as well be dead, yes, far better."

"And you will stand all this expense?"

"Certainly, for it is my intention to pay back to the miners every dollar they subscribed for my ransom, for, as I said, I have the means to do it and far more."

"You are a plucky woman, Miss Seldon; but see, we are approaching the valley now and you must prepare for a welcome," and Doctor Dick called to Harding to come to a halt.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE MINERS' WELCOME.

HARDING drew up promptly at the call of Doctor Dick.

He had heard the voices of the two within the stage, yet not what was said, and he was anxious to know how Celeste took the news of the disappearance of the man whom she had come to the Wild Western frontier to see.

"Do you mean that I shall mount to the box, sir?" asked Celeste in answer to what the doctor had said after the coach halted.

"I do, Miss Seldon, for the men will wish to see you, and within ten minutes more we will be in the valley."

"Of course I cannot refuse, sir," and Celeste sprung out of the coach and mounted to the box, taking her seat by the side of Harding, while Doctor Dick settled himself upon her trunk upon the top of the coach.

"Now, miss, we'll make 'em hum," said Harding, and he cracked his whip in a way that sent the team along at a splendid pace.

As they neared the turn into the valley Harding took a bugle, in lieu of a stage horn, and played in a skillful manner the ringing notes of "Annie Laurie," intending the sentiment to apply to Celeste, Doctor Dick from his perch the while taking the reins.

The notes of the bugle ringing out the touching air brought tears to the eyes of Celeste Seldon, who however was startled a moment after as the stage came in sight of a hundred horsemen drawn up in two lines, one on either side of the trail.

They were a wild, reckless looking lot of rough riders, but the cheer they gave when they saw Celeste on the box came from their hearts.

Their hats were doffed, and as the yells burst from their lips they closed in behind the coach four abreast and came dashing along as an escort.

Celeste waved her handkerchief vigorously, her beautiful face flushed to crimson, and her lips quivering, her eyes swimming with the emotion that almost overwhelmed her.

"Three cheers for the Lady of Last Chance," came in the deep voice of Doctor

Dick from the top of the coach, and they were given with savage earnestness.

Along dashed the coach, Harding lashing his horses into a run and driving with marvelous skill, while behind them thundered the hundred horsemen yelling like demons in their glad welcome to the first lady to visit their wild camp.

Celeste saw the cabins along the canyon valley, perched here and there upon the hills, and at last discovered the group of buildings that marked the settlement the miners were pleased to call the "City" of Last Chance.

Gathered there was a vast crowd of men, and when the stage came in sight and three persons were seen on top, with the mounted escort hastening after, the yells of welcome began.

The roar floated down the valley and reached the ears of Celeste Seldon, and she muttered in a low tone:

"How kind they all are."

"This is indeed a welcome to be proud of, and never can I forget it."

"They mean it, miss," said Harding, and he felt just pride in his frontier home at the reception, and the manner in which Celeste received it greatly pleased him.

On flew the horses, and up the hill they dashed to at last come to a halt before the hotel.

The din was now terrific, for the voices of the horsemen joined in with the miners about the hotel, who, with one accord drew their revolvers and began to empty them in the air.

As there were hundreds of miners and all were armed with a couple each of revolvers, the rattling of the fusillade may be imagined.

Celeste bowed right and left, waving her handkerchief, until Landlord Larry aided her to dismount and led her into the hotel, and the welcome was at an end.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE COUNCIL.

CELESTE SELDON was not one to put on airs.

She had been well reared, was refined, lovable by nature, plucky enough for a man, for she had the heart and will to do and dare anything where duty called, and yet she was as simple as a child by nature.

She was deeply touched by the reception she had received, and in glancing about, when she saw only a wild-looking set of men, rude log cabins and an air of the far frontier pervading all, she knew that it was just what she must expect to see and find, and she at once adapted herself to circumstances.

She was escorted by Landlord Larry to her cabin, Harding himself bringing her trunk and another miner her saddle and bridle.

The appearance of the cabin revealed to her at a glance how much had been done to make her comfortable, and she praised the neat quarters and expressed the greatest satisfaction in her surroundings.

When she went over to the hotel to dinner the whole crowd of miners there rose at her entrance, and every hat was doffed and placed beneath the bench on which the man sat, for hat-racks were not one of the luxuries of the Last Chance Hotel, and a miner would as soon have thought of parting with his pistols as his head covering.

At his own table, where sat beside himself Doctor Dick and Harding, Landlord Larry placed Celeste Seldon, and she was given the best the house afforded, and expressed herself as being treated far more kindly than she had had the slightest anticipation of.

The most courteous Celeste said that she would like to consult with the three she regarded as her immediate protectors, the Landlord, Doctor Dick and Harding.

So the three met her in the landlord's private office and Celeste at once said:

"I wish first to thank all of my kind friends here, through you, gentlemen, for the very generous manner in which you have received and treated me here."

"I know that the ransom money demanded for my release was quickly raised by the people here, you three being particularly generous; but I desire to say that I have the money to pay you back, and will do so."

"No, no, under no circumstances, Miss Seldon," said Doctor Dick eagerly, and the others chimed in with him.

But Celeste was firm in her determination, and said:

"I have no claim upon you, and besides, I am very well off, so I shall insist, and Landlord Larry, I will give you a draft for the amount upon an Eastern bank, and for more, as there will be another demand upon me, in the amount to ransom the one who came here for me, Mr. Bernard Brandon."

"Do you believe a ransom will be demanded for him, Miss Seldon?" asked Doctor Dick.

"Certainly; for why else was he taken?"

"I cannot see what ransom the outlaws expected through him."

"When he was wounded they captured certain papers he had in his possession, and these proved that he had friends who were able and willing to pay for his release."

"Under such circumstances, then, the kidnapping of the poor fellow might have been made," Doctor Dick said.

"Yes, I am sure that such was the case."

"But will you pay his ransom, Miss Seldon?"

"Why not, Landlord Larry?"

"I think," said Doctor Dick, "that as you came to visit Last Chance, we, the dwellers here, should be responsible and pay these ransoms."

"So say I," put in Harding, quickly.

"And I agree with you," added the landlord.

"Under no circumstances will I hear to it, for I will pay all, my own and the ransom of Mr. Brandon, so please send the draft through for the money, Landlord Larry, and while here I will take steps to find out all I can regarding my father, who was last heard of in this part of the country."

"Miss Seldon, I can tell you what you must know sooner or later about your father, who, let me say, was also my friend," said Doctor Dick.

CHAPTER LIX

AS HE BELIEVED IT TO BE.

It seemed hard, that in the joy of her release from captivity in the hands of the outlaws, Celeste Seldon should feel the blow of knowing that the unfortunate Bernard Brandon had been captured and she would have to pay a ransom for him, while she also had to suffer still further in learning what was her father's fate, as told her by Doctor Dick.

When he said to her that sooner or later she would have to know the truth, which he would tell her, his words impressed her with the belief that she had to feel another bitter blow.

It had been a long time since she had seen her father, the last time when she was a little girl, and she remembered that he had left home under a cloud, and she had never expected to see him again.

With her mother dead, and her father a fugitive wanderer, she had been sent by her guardian, left so by the wishes of her parents, to a Northern school, and there had had no one upon whom to lean, to lavish her affection.

But when it came out, as will be shown in due time, that she was the victim of a cruel plot, as was also her father, she had promptly acted for herself, and they found that they had aroused one who was dangerous in anger and just resentment.

By a certain clause in her mother's will, before becoming of age, she obtained possession of large sums in bank, and this enabled her to do that which she had set out to accomplish, find her father, clear his name from stain, and punish the guilty ones who had been his and her foes.

In carrying out this resolve Bernard Brandon had been sent West, with a result already known, and following him, she had been made prisoner by outlaws, robbed, and discovered that her messenger was crazed by a wound, a captive, and she was again to be robbed for his release.

But a still greater blow was to fall upon her she now felt assured, from the tone and words of Doctor Dick.

But she nerved herself to bear the worst, and asked calmly:

"What have you to tell me, Doctor Dick?"

"Of your father."

"You knew him?"

"Yes, for though my senior in years we were devoted friends."

"Have you seen him since coming West?"

"I have not; but let me tell you that, when on a scout with Buffalo Bill, the latter was rescued by a person who was alone, and on his way to W—."

"The scout had with him a prisoner, a deserter from the army and a murderer, who had been taken here in Last Chance, and he was taking him a prisoner to Fort Faraway, when he was attacked by a desperado by the name of Headlight Joe and his gang."

"With his horse shot and falling upon him, Buffalo Bill would have been killed and his prisoner rescued, but for the coming of the horseman referred to, and who put the outlaws to flight."

"He gave the name of Andrew Seldon, said nothing as to why he was in that part of the country or where he lived, and went on his way."

"When I came up with Buffalo Bill and heard his story of his rescue, and the name of his rescuer, it at once recalled my old-time friend, and with the scout as my companion we later sought to find him."

"We trailed him to his home, where he had dwelt with one other comrade, and they were missing together."

"And where was that, sir?"

"In the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, Miss Seldon."

"And you found him?" eagerly asked Celeste, while the landlord and Harding gazed at her with deepest sympathy at what they felt she must hear.

"We found his horse, or rather the wreck of it, for, mining under a cliff a thousand feet in height, it had caved in upon them, burying them beneath a mountain of red sandstone."

Celeste shuddered and covered her face with her hands, but very quickly regained her composure and said:

"Are you sure that my father was in the mine when it caved in?"

"I am very sure, Miss Seldon, that both he and his comrade were."

"We, the scout and myself, were camped in the canyon and heard the cave-in, and it felt like a mighty earthquake, and was at night."

"We made a thorough search the next day but could not find any trace of a human being, and their horses shared the same fate, with a dog also, which we heard barking that same night."

"Yes, there is no doubt of your father's fate."

"I thank you, Doctor Dick, for your telling me all; but, I must see Buffalo Bill, the famous scout, and ask him to guide me to the fatal spot, the scene of my father's lone life in these wilds, and of his death," said Celeste in a low tone that revealed how deeply she felt her father's fate.

CHAPTER LX.

A METAMORPHOSIS.

WHEN Harding met with Old Huckleberry, the stage-driver who had so mysteriously disappeared, and whose fate was a mystery to the miners of Last Chance, that old worthy saw the coach drive on its way while he regarded its departure with the complacency of one not afraid to be left alone, and fully capable of taking care of himself.

He stood for some time in silent meditation, after the coach had disappeared, and then, shouldering his rifle, struck off over the mountains with an evident purpose in view.

A walk of some ten miles brought him to a secluded nook in the mountains, a perfect basin a dozen acres in size, heavily wooded, with plenty of grass and water.

A narrow pass, not twenty feet in width, was the only entrance to the basin, and this was securely fastened up with long poles.

Over this Old Huckleberry clambered, and as he walked into the basin a couple of horses feeding there greeted him with a welcoming neigh.

In the further end, among the pines was a

brush cabin, and in it were blankets and a camping outfit, with saddle, pack-saddle and bridles.

Old Huckleberry proceeded to build a fire and cook dinner, after which he caught one of his horses, saddled him, and strapped on some blankets and a bag of provisions.

Leading the horse out of the basin he replaced the barrier securely, so that the other animal could not get out, and mounting, started off for the fort.

As he rode along he muttered to himself:

"I can do nothing alone, I feel certain, and by this time the one man whose aid I can best depend upon is at the fort, and he will gladly return with me."

Pressing on at a steady gait he did not halt until some time after nightfall, and then built no fire, but ate a cold supper, staked his horse out, rolled up in his blankets and was soon fast asleep.

He rose early and the coming of day found him several miles on his way from his night camp.

About eight o'clock he halted, built a fire, broiled the steak of an antelope he had killed, some crackers and bacon, his horse faring well on the grass near by.

A rest of an hour and a half and he was again in the saddle, keeping up the same steady gait until noon, when another halt was made for a couple of hours.

On through the afternoon he urged his horse once more, halting only after nightfall.

But two hours, before daybreak he was in the saddle and now his horse was pushed more rapidly forward, as though a long rest lay not very far ahead.

It was two hours before noon when the worn-out horse pricked up his ears as he saw ahead a flag fluttering in the skies a mile ahead.

In through the stockade gate of Fort Faraway rode Old Huckleberry, and he asked to be at once taken to the quarters of the commanding officer.

Major Randall surveyed the old fellow keenly and said pleasantly:

"Well, old man, what can I do for you?"

"I'll tell yer, pard, soon as I sees of thet gent in sojer clothes hain't goin' ter speak ter a old friend," and Old Huck looked over to an officer who was talking to Major Randall when he entered.

He wore a fatigue uniform and his shoulder-straps bore the rank of a captain with the insignia of a surgeon of cavalry.

He was tall, erect, had broad shoulders, and was of powerful build, while, strange to say for an officer, he wore his black hair long, it falling in heavy masses down his back.

His face was full of decision, courage and intelligence, and handsome as well, and in his dark, piercing eyes there was a strange mixture of gentleness and a fiery nature combined.

In a voice strangely musical for a man's, he said, as he arose:

"My dear old pard, am I so remiss as to forget the face of a friend, for though I see that it is familiar I cannot just place you."

"Now, Pard Doc, I thinks that hain't jist squar' ter fergit a old friend," said Old Huckleberry, while Major Randall said:

"He certainly knows you well, Major Powell."

"And I knows Major Randall well, too; but as you don't seem ter git onter jist who I is, gents, I'll tell yer by taking off my wig and specs—see!"

The wig, or shock rather, of long gray hair was removed, the spectacles taken off, and the face of Buffalo Bill was revealed to the astonished gaze of Major Randall and Surgeon Powell, who both uttered an exclamation of amazement and then burst out into hearty laughter, at the metamorphosis of Old Huckleberry into the noted chief of scouts.

CHAPTER LXI.

A PARD TO THE TO.

WELL, Cody, what does this masquerading mean?" cried Major Randall, after he and Surgeon Powell had shaken hands with the scout.

* Surgeon Frank Powell then of the U. S. A., and known as "White Beaver, the Surgeon Scout," but now Mayor of Lacrosse, Wis., and a physician as well. THE AUTHOR.

"It is a part of a plot, major, for I have been driving stage," answered the scout.

"Driving stage?"

"Yes, sir, I took the semi-monthly coach running from W— to Last Chance, after the road-agents had killed Benton and Dockery, and no one cared to drive the run, unless it was Doctor Dick the gold gambler of Last Chance."

"Did he take the coach through, Cody?"

"Oh yes, sir, he is not a man to scare, and he drove several runs; but then his professional duties as gambler and doctor, kept him busy, and I rigged up as Old Huckleberry and drove the runs to see what I could find out."

"And what did you find out?"

"I believe I discovered sufficient, sir, to stretch several ropes with human weights."

"That means you are on the right trail to bag those road-agents?"

"Yes, sir."

"They appear to be well-handled?"

"They are, sir, for their chief is a man of remarkable pluck, cunning and skill, and he handles them in a masterly manner."

"Who is he?"

"I do not believe his own men could tell you, sir, for he goes masked, and robed in black, even covering up his horse from ears to tail."

"That is strange."

"It is the safest plan, sir."

"And who is driving now?"

"Harding, sir, the ex-soldier, and whom, I may confidentially, say, major, I have taken into my service, not as a scout, but as a spy, at Last Chance."

"A fine fellow; but I fear he will be killed as driver on that trail."

"I hope not, sir, and he has escaped splendidly through great dangers thus far."

"Well, what will be your plans now?"

"I have been hanging on the trail, sir, since my mysterious disappearance as Old Huckleberry, and have been hovering about the Death Line taking notes and seeing what I could discover."

"I have a camp in a basin in the mountain range, and there I left my pack-horse and outfit while I came here."

"You have something to report to me, then?"

"No, sir, not particularly, though I came for a purpose."

"And that purpose, Cody?"

"I was aware, sir, that Surgeon Frank Powell was coming to the fort, to relieve Doctor Dey, and that his duties as surgeon would not begin for some weeks yet."

"As we have been on so many scouting expeditions together, and Doctor Powell is a regiment in himself, I wanted him to go back with me and unearth these road-agents, following their trail to the very end."

"You could have no one better; what do you say, Powell?"

"How could I refuse, major, after Bill's most flattering remarks about what I can do, and which prove he has Irish blood in his veins."

"Ah, I knew that you would go, Frank," responded Cody.

"Of course I will, and am ready when you say the word, only I must ask Major Randall for a leave, should we not accomplish our purpose before I am ordered for duty here."

"That will be all right, Powell; but when will you start, Cody, for Doctor Powell will have to first relieve Doctor Dey, as that would be the best plan, and then go, leaving his assistant surgeon in charge."

"It is for you to decide, major."

"Very well, say in just ten days from now."

"All right, sir; but, after a couple of days rest I had better return to my basin camp, and be on the watch, and I can tell Surgeon Powell just where I will meet him upon a certain date."

"You know best, Cody; but do not venture much until Powell joins you, for well I know what a team you two make together."

"I feel certain, sir, that together we can run down these masked marauders," was the confident reply of Buffalo Bill, and when he went to his quarters soon after, Surgeon Powell accompanied him, for the two were the fastest of friends.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE DRIVER'S LETTER.

AFTER several days' stay at the fort Buffalo Bill started upon his return to his secret camp near Last Chance trail.

He carried with him another pack-horse, well laden with bedding and supplies, for the weather was growing steadily colder, and winter would soon be upon the land.

He knew that little snow generally fell as far down as the Last Chance trail, but it would be well to be prepared for any emergency, and as the coaches ran through the winter the road-agents would by no means take a rest from their heinous work.

Riding leisurely on the back trail, not caring to push his horses too hard, Buffalo Bill reached his basin-camp in the mountains on the third day, and the animal he left there pranced like a colt at seeing him come back.

His first work was to make his quarters more secure and comfortable, and this took him a day, and the following, having strengthened the barrier in the pass, to prevent his horses from breaking out, he started off on foot for the W— and Last Chance stage-trail.

He would not ride as he did not wish his trail to be seen by any prowling road-agents, and on foot he could accomplish more and be concealed far better than if he had gone mounted.

Before parting with Surgeon Frank Powell at the fort, Buffalo Bill had drawn a map of the country, marking the trail the Surgeon Scout was to follow, and also just where he was to meet him, the place of rendezvous being the deserted camp where was the grave of Black Heart Bill.

When Buffalo Bill approached the trail, at the scene of the Dead Line tragedies, he went most cautiously.

But no one was there, and going up to the little cross, the scout bent over and thrust his hand into the spot where, as Old Huckleberry, he had his "post-office" with Harding.

He took out a slip of paper and read it with clouded brow.

It was as follows:

"I slip away at night from Last Chance to leave this here for you

"It was unfortunate that you should have had to go to the fort when you did, as on my run back I was held up here by the agents.

"I had taken your advice and pressed through the other end at night, thus escaping men lying in wait for me.

"On my return I had a young lady passenger, a Miss Celeste Seldon, coming out here to find her father, a miner, and a young man whom she had sent in search of him.

"It was the young man I told you of who had been wounded and had never regained his reason.

"I had a large sum of money on, which was taken, and Miss Seldon was carried off as a captive to be held for ransom.

"The miners have subscribed the ransom-money, and she is to be released.

"I will let you know particulars more fully as soon as I get the opportunity, endeavoring to have a letter here for you when I come to make the exchange, paying the ransom and receiving the lady from the outlaws.

"Doctor Dick will come with me; but the outlaws threaten to kill Miss Seldon if others come, or if any one else leaves Last Chance to pursue them, and that chief will keep his word.

HARDING."

Then there followed a postscript which read:

"The young messenger, Bernard Brandon, has most mysteriously disappeared, and no search can find him.

H."

Buffalo Bill read this letter over twice and said in a musing way:

"Those outlaws are becoming bold indeed, when they deliberately rob a young girl and make her their prisoner.

"The man, Brandon, was her messenger, sent in search of her father, and his mysterious disappearance, to me, means that he has been captured by the road-agents.

"Now, I dare not halt the coach on the way to receive the girl, if the road-agents give her up; but I will be on the watch, see it go by, and be as near this spot, when the ransom is paid, as I dare be, for from here

I may be able to track those devils to their lair."

So saying the scout set out upon his return for his basin camp.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE SCOUT ON THE WATCH.

WHEN Buffalo Bill returned from the Dead Line to his secret camp, it was to prepare himself for several days' absence from it, for his intention was to hang about the Last Chance trail discovering all that it was in his power to do.

He found a retreat upon a cliff, where there was a thicket of pines, giving him a view in both directions of the trail for a mile or more.

He saw from there the coach coming to the rendezvous, with the ransom money for Celeste Seldon's release, and upon the box beside the driver was Doctor Dick.

Yet the scout did not know who might be inside the stage, so dared not make any sign of his presence.

On went the coach, and Buffalo Bill at once started down from the cliff and followed in its trail at an Indian trot, which kept him well up with it, yet just out of sight.

As he approached the Dead Line, he went more cautiously, and reaching the entrance to the pass, made a flank movement and climbed to the top of the ridge.

It was after continued search that he at last found a point of observation, and he risked his life, by reaching a spot where he would be dashed to death hundreds of feet below, should his foot slip or nerve fail him.

From this spot, where he clung to a cecgon tree, he turned his field-glass down the pass, and could see the coach standing at the Dead Line, a quarter of a mile away.

He saw that the coach had been turned to the rightabout, the team being headed back for Last Chance, and Doctor Dick was standing near it, Harding being still on the box and grasping the reins.

Watching, with every nerve strung, the scout saw the masked road-agent appear, and later the fair captive.

Then followed two other road-agents bearing the baggage of Celeste Seldon, and soon after the coach started upon its return.

Buffalo Bill could not have reached a point to head it off had he tried, and he felt that he must still be cautious.

But he was determined to reach the Dead Line and take up the trail from there, for certainly the road-agents had not allowed Celeste Seldon to walk to the scene of the exchange.

After half an hour he gained a point just over the Dead Line, and from there saw that all was quiet.

The outlaws had left, beyond all doubt.

It was an hour before the scout could make his way around to the Dead Line, and there he felt in the little "post-office" for a letter from Harding.

But none was there.

"He dared not attempt it," he muttered.

Then taking a leaf from his note-book he wrote:

"I am again on the trail.

"I saw the lady returned to you.

"I will take the outlaws' trail from here and hope to track them to their lair.

"In a few days now I will have the Surgeon Scout with me in my work, so the end is not far away.

"Keep me posted as before, as I will you.

"Yours,

B. B."

This was placed in the receptacle near the cross, and shouldering his rifle Buffalo Bill set out to look for trails.

It took him a long while to satisfy himself that he was on the right track, but at last he struck off at a lively step along a trail which only a man of his frontier skill could have discovered.

After a walk of a mile he suddenly came upon a spot where there were the tracks of a horse visible.

These were followed a mile further, and the scout saw that the ground was trampled down but not by hoofs.

The track he had followed thus far had been that of one hoof only, showing that

the other three had been muffled, but one had lost its covering.

The trampled grass and ground revealed that the horses had been left there, and all had had their hoofs muffled in some way.

But the keen eyes of the scout picked up the trail and he followed it quite rapidly until he came to a small stream.

"There were eight horses along, as their tracks show here, but how many men I do not know.

"When they have gone some miles further they will remove the mufles from their horses' hoofs and then the trail will be easy to follow and it now looks to me as though I will be able to track them to their retreat, and that means the end.

"But night is coming on now and this is just the place for me to branch off and go to my own camp, following the trail to-morrow on horseback."

CHAPTER LXIV.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE CLOVEN HOOF.

BUFFALO BILL quickly decided what course he would pursue.

He would walk to his camp, get some provisions and an increased outfit, return there for the balance of the night and go into camp, so as to make an early start in the morning directly on the trail.

So he set out at a rapid walk and within three hours' time had reached his basin camp.

He quickly set to work to look up some provisions and get ready for his trail, and in an hour was ready to start, mounted upon his best horse.

It was after midnight when he reached his camping-place, but he was soon asleep wrapped snugly in his blankets, while his horse was resting and feeding.

With the breaking of dawn he was up and ready to start, and a few miles away discovered the spot where the outlaws had removed the mufles from the hoofs of their horses.

From there on he felt no further anxiety about the trail, so cooked his breakfast, ate it leisurely and again started on his way.

He understood now thoroughly, why the outlaws had left no trails going to and coming from the Dead Line and other points upon the Overland Trail.

The muffled hoofs of the horses explained this, and they stuck to their determination to leave no tracks until they got far away from the scene of their evil deeds.

Buffalo Bill did not believe that he would have to go very far from the Dead Line before he found their retreat, and was expecting to find out where they were in hiding within half a day's ride from his starting point.

But noon came and still the trail led him on.

He had plenty of time, so did not hurry.

He could do nothing alone, other than to discover the retreat, and then he would make for his rendezvous with the Surgeon Scout, and together they would plan their future movements.

But night came on and found him still on the trail.

He was compelled to go into camp, for he could not follow it by night, and he soon made himself comfortable.

Again he started after daybreak, and a ride of several hours caused him to say:

"This trail is surely leading direct to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

"Can they have sought that weird land for a retreat?—yet why not, for no safer one could be found."

Within an hour more he felt that the country had a familiar look, and he was not long in discovering, upon riding a few miles further, that he had ridden right along there with Doctor Dick when on the trail of Andrew Seldon.

Suddenly he came upon the grand vista of the canyon and at once drew rein.

There before him was the mighty view that had so impressed him on his former visit, and he knew that the outlaws must have found a retreat in the depths somewhere of the Grand Canyon.

Not daring to go further on horseback he rode off the trail to find a hiding-place for his horse, and after a short search discover-

ed a little glen where he felt that he would be safe, unless his trail was discovered and he was tracked there.

There was a pool of water in one end, and grass about it, so he staked his horse out feeling that he could at least subsist comfortably there for a couple of days, should he be kept away that long.

Hiding his saddle and bridle he set out on foot, with a couple of blankets strapped on his back, his bag of provisions, rifle, lasso and belt of arms.

He went back to the trail and again took it up where he had left it to hide his horse.

Every step forward now was one of caution, for the country was open in places, and he did not know what moment he might come upon a party of outlaws and have to fight for his life.

But he reached the rim of the canyon by dark, and a short search revealed to him that the trail down into the depths of the tremendous chasm had been discovered also by the road-agents, and their tracks led down into it.

The night passed with a cold supper and breakfast, and then he set off on foot down the dizzy pathway leading to the bottom of the canyon, for now he felt sure that he would discover the lair of the outlaws, and that done and his own presence unknown to them, he could arrange for an attack upon them at his leisure.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE MINER'S MISSION.

THE gold-hunter, Andrew Seldon, rode on his way from his retreat in the canyon, determined to risk his life by returning to Fort Faraway and reporting the presence in the Grand Canyon of the masked outlaw band.

If recognized as Sergeant Wallace Weston, under sentence of death, he would be at once arrested and his execution would follow.

But he knew that Wallace Weston was believed to be dead, reported as dying of starvation in the desert at the time of his escape.

As Sergeant Weston he had been an erect man of martial bearing, with a face smoothly shaven and hair cut short.

As Andrew Seldon he wore his hair long, and his beard fell half-way down to his belt, while he further had a pair of spectacles to disguise his eyes with, and had manufactured a hump in the shoulders of his coat that gave him a changed form, like one who stoops badly.

"But come what may, I shall risk it," he said firmly as he went on his way.

His night in the deserted camp where was the grave of Black Heart Bill, the reader will remember, and it was upon leaving there and striking out for Fort Faraway that he suddenly drew his horse to a halt as he saw a dust far ahead.

The dust was approaching him, and it was made by horses crossing a sandy part of the country before him.

Out of the dust suddenly emerged a horseman, and behind him followed a pack-animal.

Hidden in a clump of timber Andrew Seldon saw that it was a white man, and that the trail he was following would bring him near his position.

"I believe that it is Buffalo Bill," he muttered as he saw that the horseman was clad in buckskin and wore his hair long.

But as he came nearer he said eagerly:

"It is the Surgeon Scout—Doctor Frank Powell!"

The coming horseman eyed the timber carefully as he approached.

Something had evidently made him suspicious of danger there, and turning to the left he was about to flank it, when Andrew Seldon rode into view and waved his hat.

Then he rode forward once more, but cautiously, for the chances were that the man he saw might be a foe, he well knew.

But Andrew Seldon raised his hands above his head, in token of peace, and Surgeon Powell rode straight toward him.

"I dare not let him know who I am, though I would trust him, Heaven knows.

"He knows me as well as any man, and I'll see how I stand the test of his piercing eyes," muttered the gold-hunter, and as the Surgeon Scout drew nearer he called out:

"Are you Buffalo Bill, sir?"

"No, I am Surgeon Frank Powell of the army."

"I see now, sir, that you are not Buffalo Bill, for I met him once when he was in a tight place with road-agents.

"Are you from Fort Faraway, sir?"

"I am."

"I was on my way there to see Buffalo Bill, when I saw you coming, sir."

"And I am on my way to seek Buffalo Bill, for I have an appointment to meet him not many miles from here at a deserted camp, where there is a grave."

"I know it well, sir, for I made the grave, and I stopped there last night."

"You made what grave?"

"The grave of Black Heart Bill the desperado who is buried there."

"You killed him, you mean?"

"I did, sir, for he had wronged me greatly."

"Who are you, may I ask?"

"My name is Andrew Seldon, sir, and I am a miner."

"It seems to me that Buffalo Bill has spoken to me of you, in fact I am sure of it now, for you it was who saved him from Headlight Joe and his outlaws."

"Yes, sir."

"But Cody believes you to be dead."

"How so, sir?"

"He wished to find you, so tracked you into the Grand Canyon, to find your horse buried beneath a fallen cliff, and he thought you were beneath it all."

"No, sir, I escaped; but as you are going to seek Buffalo Bill may I join you?"

"You may," was the reply.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE GOLD-HUNTER'S STORY.

"You may join me, Mr. Seldon, and I shall be glad to have your company," repeated Surgeon Powell as he rode along by the side of the gold-hunter.

"I will be your guide to the deserted camp, sir; but do you expect to find Mr. Cody there?"

"I hope so, but should he not be I shall await him."

"I am glad to hear you say that, sir, for I am most anxious to see him, and I will tell you why."

"If you care to."

"I know your secret, Surgeon Powell, and am delighted to feel that I will have your aid as well as Buffalo Bill's in what I wish to do."

"And what do you wish to do, Mr. Seldon?"

"I will have to ask you to keep my secret, sir."

"I will do so."

"Well, Surgeon Powell, I am a miner, and I strolled into the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in my prospecting tours, and there discovered several rich gold claims.

"On my way there it was that I came upon a camp, and in it I found an unfortunate fellow who was wounded, yet bound securely.

"He had gone out in search of gold with a desperado by the name of Black Heart Bill, and finding gold, the other sought to rob him of it, so shot him.

"Failing to find it, he was anxious to have his victim recover and show him where it was, intending then to kill him.

"It was while Black Heart Bill was away from his camp that I came to it, and I heard his victim's story.

"Upon the return of the man I recognized him as an old foe of mine, one to whom, with others, I owed a wicked life.

"I forced him to fight me a duel and he fell.

"I buried him and cut his name on the quaking aspen near his grave, and then, nursing the wounded man to life, we went to his gold find.

"It did not pan out very rich, so I went to one I knew of, down in the Grand Canyon.

"While I was away at W—to get prisoners, my partner heard the cliff cracking, and so moved away, up the canyon to another mine we had.

"He was just in time to save his life, for the cliff fell, and Buffalo Bill was in the valley that night with a comrade and heard the terrific roar of the falling cliff.

"They believed that my comrade and myself were buried beneath the mountain of rock, but we were gazing at them the while and watched them ride away."

"Some time after I found that others had come into the canyon, and I discovered that it was a camp of outlaws, while more still, I saw that they had a female captive."

"I crept near enough at night to hear and see all, and I saw a young and beautiful girl, and the outlaw lieutenant held her a captive for his chief, until a large ransom was paid for her by the miners of Last Chance."

"I at once decided to act, and having seen them start with her to give her up for ransom, I came on my way to find Buffalo Bill and guide him to the retreat of the outlaws."

"That young girl, sir, gave the name of Celeste Seldon, so is my daughter."

"Now, Surgeon Powell, you have my story, and my comrade is in my camp, awaiting my return!"

Frank Powell was greatly impressed with the story of the gold-hunter, to which he had listened with the deepest attention.

After he had heard all he said:

"My dear pard, you have made a very valuable discovery indeed, and Buffalo Bill will be only too glad to have you guide him to the outlaw camp, for that is his mission and mine here."

"I sincerely hope that your daughter will be given up in safety to the miners, and that her ransom will be recovered."

"She will be given up in safety, sir, I am certain, for I have perfect confidence in the outlaw lieutenant, who told his story to Celeste, and I only ask that he may not share the fate of the other outlaws," and the gold-hunter made known what had occurred between Wolf and Celeste, and Doctor Powell replied:

"I agree with you, and if he acts squarely toward Miss Seldon, I will urge that he be allowed to go free, when his comrades are to hang."

CHAPTER LXVII.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

WHEN the Surgeon Scout was guided to the deserted camp by Andrew Seldon, he at once saw that Buffalo Bill had not reached there.

But there he was to wait for him, and so the horses were staked out and the two made themselves at home there.

Doctor Powell went to have a look at the grave of Black Heart Bill, and the inscription upon the white bark of the aspen tree, and said, as he read the name:

"Hugh Mayhew was his name."

"Yes, sir."

"There was a Sergeant Manton Mayhew killed at Fort Farway by Sergeant Wallace Weston, who was sentenced to be shot for the deed, but escaped the very moment of his execution."

"Was he never captured, sir?"

"Poor fellow, he went to an even worse fate than being shot, for he wandered into the desert and died of starvation there."

"I know that he was guilty of killing Manton Mayhew, but I am sure he had some grave reason for so doing, but which he would never make known."

"He was a splendid soldier, brave and true, and he would have been commissioned had not that sad affair occurred."

"Did he give no reason for his act, sir?"

"None; he simply accepted his fate, though it was said to clear himself he would have to compromise others, and this he would not do."

"Poor fellow!"

"Yes, I often think of his sad fate."

An antelope was killed that afternoon, and after enjoying a good supper the surgeon and the gold-hunter lighted their pipes and sat down for a talk, both anxiously awaiting the coming of Buffalo Bill.

After sitting in silence for some minutes the gold-hunter said:

"Surgeon Powell, you were speaking of Wallace Weston to-day?"

"Yes."

"You may have noted that the name of Mayhew is upon yonder aspen tree?"

"And referred to the fact."

"I put it there."

"Yes."

"Then I knew who Black Heart Bill was."

"That is so."

"I had not thought of that."

"He was the brother of Manton Mayhew the sergeant."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir."

"You knew Sergeant Mayhew then?"

"Intimately, for we were boys together."

"Ah! tell me of him."

"We lived near each other, sir, and Manton Mayhew was my rival at school, and also for the love of a pretty girl whom I idolized."

"He did all in his power to ruin me, and when I obtained a position in a bank, where he also was a clerk, he did wreck my life, for I was accused of robbery, and worse still of murdering the watchman, who caught me in the act."

"I would surely have been hanged but for the girl I spoke of, who forced me to fly for my life, aiding me to escape."

"I fled, to prove my innocence, and became a wanderer."

"Then I received a letter from the woman I loved, telling me that she had discovered that I really was a thief and a murderer, and that she abhorred where she had loved me."

"And more, when, in my despair I wrote to one who had been my friend to hear from home, I was told that Manton Mayhew had been the means of ruining my father financially, and the blow had driven him to suicide, while my poor mother, heart-broken, had died soon after my flight."

"Nor was this all, for Hugh Mayhew, the brother of Manton, had married the girl I had loved."

"Several years after other news came to me from my old home, and to the effect that Brandon Mayhew had gone to the bad and in a drunken brawl had wounded a companion fatally as he had believed, and he had fled no one knew where."

"His brother Hugh had wrecked his father's bank, and in a drunken frenzy had shot his wife one night, and he, too, had become a fugitive."

"Well, to end the story quickly, for I hate to dwell upon it, Manton Mayhew had joined the army, and, a good soldier, had become a sergeant."

"Ordered to Fort Faraway he had met there Sergeant Weston, whom he recognized, and fearing to be exposed in his crimes, he had at once attacked him, telling him he would kill him and say that it was on account of his insubordination."

"But Wallace Weston was armed, having just been given a revolver by an officer to take to his quarters, and he killed Mayhew as he was about to drive a knife to his heart."

"Rather than bring out the old story, and perhaps be carried back East to be tried for the murder of the bank watchman, of which he was innocent, Sergeant Wallace Weston submitted in silence to his trial and accepted his fate, feeling that his life was one of despair."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE TRUTH.

"AND do you know all this to be as you have stated?" asked Surgeon Powell, when the gold-hunter had finished his story.

"I do, sir."

"Knowing it, you did not come to the rescue of poor Weston?"

"I did not, sir."

"May I ask why?" and Frank Powell spoke sternly.

"I will tell you the reason, Surgeon Powell, if you will pledge me your word to receive it in sacred confidence."

"I will so pledge myself, Mr. Seldon."

"Because, sir, I am Wallace Weston."

Frank Powell was always a calm, cool man, but now he sprung to his feet, dropping his pipe, and cried:

"Do you speak the truth?"

"I do, sir."

"Upon honor?"

"Yes."

"Now I recognize the look that has so haunted me since I met you this morning."

"Upon my soul, Weston, I am glad to see that you are not dead, that you can clear up the story of Mayhew's killing and announce yourself once more as a guiltless man."

"But I cannot, sir, for you forget that I am accused of murdering the watchman and robbing the bank."

"Is there no way in which you can disprove that?"

"Only by the confession of the guilty ones."

"Who were they?"

"The Mayhews, and one other."

"They were guilty?"

"Yes, sir."

"And who was the other one?"

"A clerk in the bank and devoted friend of the Mayhews."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know, sir."

"And they are dead."

"Manton and Hugh Mayhew are dead, by my hand, but where proof of their crime can be found I cannot tell, and so I am forced to hide under an assumed name—yes, Doctor Powell, the name of a dead man, Andrew Seldon, the one whose body was found by the rock in the desert and buried for mine."

"You have had a remarkable escape, Weston—"

"Seldon now, sir, for that is the name I have taken, and let me now tell you how that poor man, the real Andrew Seldon, was plotted against."

"I shall be glad to hear all that you are willing to tell me, Seldon."

"Well, sir, it was while escaping from the pursuing soldiers, that I came upon a stray horse."

"He led me back to where his dead master lay upon the desert, and upon the body I found papers telling who he was, that he had left home under a cloud, had left a wife and child and riches, and come west to hide himself and hunt for gold until he dared return."

"There was a map of gold finds he had discovered, and he had struck it rich and was on his way home."

"So I dressed him in my uniform, took his traps, and went my way, and he was buried as Wallace Weston."

"It was when I was returning to the gold find of Andrew Seldon that I came upon Black Heart Bill's camp, and finding in him Hugh Mayhew, I killed him."

"My intention was to take Andrew Seldon's name, dig his gold, and to ease my conscience, give half to his family."

"I imitated his writing and wrote to his lawyer and best friend, and little daughter, for his wife was dead, as letters told me which he had with him."

"In answer, at W— I learned that I, as Andrew Seldon, dared not return home, that my daughter Celeste was dead, and my fortune gone."

"When Celeste Seldon was captured, from her own lips I learned as she told the outlaw lieutenant, that all had been a plot to keep her father away, and discovering the plot she had come out here to find him, after the messenger had failed to write home to her later than on his arrival in W—."

"Now, you know, Doctor Powell, why I was seeking Buffalo Bill, and it is my intention to seek that young girl, tell her all, and give her one-half of the fortune in gold I have found, through her father's maps and directions, in the Grand Canyon."

"And then?"

"I suppose I shall drift about the world, sir, unknown, leading an aimless life, or perhaps return to my gold-digging again."

"No, Weston, such must not be your fate, for I shall take your case in hand and prove your innocence of robbing that bank and killing the watchman, for I believe your story, and then with Sergeant Mayhew's character proven, you can readily secure pardon for taking his life as you did in self-defense."

"Heaven bless you, Surgeon Powell!"

"I only make one request, Weston."

"Yes, sir."

"That Buffalo Bill hears your story as I have, for he believes in your innocence most thoroughly, and will be most happy to welcome you back to life."

"I will be guided by you, sir, but some one is coming."

"It is Buffalo Bill," cried Frank Powell, and just then the scout rode into the camp.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE OUTLAW'S CONFESSION.

WHEN Buffalo Bill went on his way down into the Grand Canyon, he continued on until he discovered just where the outlaws had made their retreat.

This done he retraced his way as rapidly as possible, and at once went back on the trail to where he had left his horse.

The sun was just setting as he neared the spot, and he approached carefully, for he was not sure that some one had not been there and discovered the animal.

Just as he caught sight of his horse he also saw that there was some one there, a horseman who had just ridden up to the spot.

The face of the horseman was masked and this told the story in an instant.

But, Buffalo Bill had been also discovered, and up to the outlaw's shoulder went his rifle, at the same instant that the weapon of the scout was leveled.

The two rifles cracked almost as one, and the outlaw reeled, tried to spur his horse in flight and fell to the ground.

The scout at once advanced toward him, revolver in hand, when in faint voice came the words:

"Don't fire again! Your shot is fatal!"

The scout put his revolver in his belt, bent over and took the mask from the face of the wounded man, his horse following him to the spot.

The face revealed was not a bad one, but that of a man of thirty, with mustache, imperial and hair worn long.

The scout placed him at length upon his back, and made him as comfortable as he could, for he saw that he had told the truth, that the wound he had received was fatal.

Then he sat by the side of the wounded man for a while, the light of a full moon falling full in his face, and the scout heard him say:

"I am glad that I missed you, for I have done evil enough in my time."

"Who are you?" kindly asked the scout.

"My name is Alvin Wolf, and I had just resolved to lead a different life, for I am an outlaw, one of the Masked Chief's band."

"Yes, I thought as much."

"I changed my life when I met a young girl who was the chief's captive, and I intended to thwart his plans to again capture her, for we gave her up for ransom two days ago, and acting for him, I received the gold."

"He gave me a written order to take the gold to a spot near Last Chance and turn it over to him, which I did last night, for he met me there, and then he arranged to get a large ransom for a poor crazy fellow, the lover of the young girl, I believe, and so I had decided to act to protect her; but you can do so now, for I will tell you all, and then I can die content."

"Yes, it is best to die with a free conscience."

"I believe you, and more, I will tell you of one whom I helped to ruin in life, though he is dead now."

"He was a soldier at Fort Faraway, and his name was Wallace Weston."

"We were boys together, though he was older than I, and I was led into temptation by others, the Mayhew brothers, and we robbed the bank we were working in, were discovered by the watchman and Manton Mayhew killed him, and we had so planned that the robbery would fall upon the assistant cashier, Wallace Weston."

"He fled, for we intended to hang him by our testimony, and then Hugh Mayhew forged letters and caused his sweetheart to believe him guilty, and she married him, Mayhew, to in the end lose her life at his hands."

"Manton Mayhew always swore to me that he would kill Weston if he ever met him, and he said he had heard he was in the army, and so I suppose, when they met at Fort Faraway, he attempted to do so, and was killed himself."

"Poor Weston did not dare tell of the past, so had to suffer; but you can make the real truth known to clear his name, for I have it all written out as it is in my diary, which I have always carried with me and will now give to you."

"I am glad to learn all this; but let me ask you about your outlaw band?"

"Yes."

"How many are in it?"

"Nine, without counting the chief."

"Your retreat is in the Grand Canyon."

"You know this?"

"I do."

"Yes, our retreat is there."

"And your chief?"

The outlaw did not reply, and a shudder passed through his frame.

The scout spoke again and leaning over he heard a few whispered words from the dying lips which a moment after were sealed forever by death.

CHAPTER LXX.

TEARING OFF THE MASK.

WHEN Buffalo Bill rode into the camp where Surgeon Powell and the gold-hunter sat, it was seen that he was leading two horses, one carrying a pack-saddle, the other a heavy load.

The Surgeon Scout at once arose and greeted him, and said:

"Ho, Bill, what game is that?"

"A dead outlaw, the lieutenant of the band, whom I killed."

"But you are not alone, Frank?"

"No, it is your old rescuer, who was on his way to the fort to see you, when he met me."

"He was going to tell you that the outlaws have their retreat in the Grand Canyon."

"I have been to it; but how are you, Pard Seldon, and let me say that I have good news for you, as your daughter has come West to meet you and is now at Last Chance."

"Thank you, Mr. Cody, but I am aware of that fact as Surgeon Powell can tell you; but come, look me squarely in the face, and see if you know who I am."

Buffalo Bill gave a fixed look and then cried excitedly:

"By the gods of war, you are Wallace Weston or his ghost."

"I am a very healthy ghost, sir; but I am Wallace Weston, and I leave it to Surgeon Powell to tell my story to you."

The scout seized the gold-hunter's hand and wrung it hard while he said:

"Thank God you are not dead, Weston, for only this night have I heard the truth of your story from the lips of the dying outlaw, Alvin Wolf."

"Hail once my friend, then my foe, for he sided with the Mayhews against me."

"He did, and I have his diary, which tells the whole story; but now let me tell mine, and then we can compare notes and decide what is best to be done."

They first had supper, after staking out their horses, and afterward buried the body of the outlaw, Alvin Wolf.

There, until after midnight they sat talking together, the surgeon, the scout and the gold-hunter, about all that had happened, after which they retired to their blankets.

It was just dawn the next morning when Wallace Weston rode away from the old camp to make all speed to Last Chance.

His mission there was to take a letter to driver Harding which was as follows:

"Trust the bearer with your life—Pick out eight of the best men in the camp, whom you can trust, and have them pretend to start for W—on business, going in your coach."

"See that no one else goes."

"Have two leaders that are good saddle-horses, and smuggle into the coach seven saddles."

"I will meet you at Dead Line with horses, and prepare to lose your leaders then, for four horses can readily pull your empty coach on to W—."

"Your men must be the best, and fully armed."

"Yours,

"B. B."

"The Beaver will bring your answer to me."

Pushing rapidly on Wallace Weston arrived in Last Chance that night and at once sought out Harding.

Giving him his letter he received his answer, after the two had had a talk together, and then, mounted upon a fresh horse furnished him by the driver, he started upon

his return, having attracted no particular attention.

It was the next day that the coach rolled out for W— and it carried eight miners as passengers.

Arriving at Dead Line it was met there by Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and Wallace Weston, and the eight miners joined them and went up to the scout's basin camp.

Then, with the two leaders taken from Harding's coach, they had, with Wolf's horses and the pack-animals enough to mount the party.

The next morning the start was made for the Grand Canyon and the descent was made on foot in the darkness of night, the horses having been left on the rim.

The party were led by Wallace Weston, who knew the trail perfectly, and at midnight they rushed in upon the outlaw camp, giving them a complete surprise.

Revolvers rattled, cries of alarm and pain were heard, cheers were given and then silence reigned supreme, for the battle was won and four outlaws had been made prisoners—the rest were killed.

One miner had been killed, and others wounded, though slightly, and these were cared for by Doctor Powell.

In the camp, a prisoner, Bernard Brandon was found safe, but still unconscious of all about him apparently.

Wallace Weston had asked Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell to go on with him to his camp, and there they found Lucas Langley on guard, he having heard the echoes of the firing far down the canyon, and supposed that it meant an attack planned by his pard.

Without letting the secret be known, that there was gold in the canyon, Buffalo Bill ordered an early start for Last Chance and it was made by all except Lucas Langley, who remained at his cabin to await Weston's return.

Upon nearing Last Chance Buffalo Bill halted the party, to follow on a few hours later, while he rode on with Surgeon Powell and Wallace Weston.

The scout was recognized by the miners and warmly greeted, and as he dismounted at the hotel and was welcomed by Landlord Larry, and Harding, who had returned, Doctor Dick came forward and said:

"Delighted to see you, Mr. Cody, again in Last Chance."

"Yes, Doctor Dick, I am here to find Richard Mayhew, *alias* Doctor Dick, and more still, the Masked Chief of the road-agents—hold! you are covered!"

But Doctor Dick saw that all was lost, saw that the rope would be his end, and in spite of the warning of the scout, he drew his revolver.

But ere his finger touched the trigger he fell, a dead man, at the feet of Buffalo Bill, Celeste Seldon having come forward just in time to see the gambler Gold King fall his length upon the earth.

CONCLUSION.

To the excited miners Buffalo Bill turned and made a speech, for he had killed their hero, the Idol of Last Chance.

He told them how the mask of the gambler Gold King had been torn off, by the confession of the outlaw Lieutenant, Alvin Wolf, and how he had had his suspicions aroused, as had also Landlord Larry and Harding, by several things that had occurred, that Doctor Dick was not all he pretended to be.

The whole story was made known, and as the rest of the party came in, bearing the booty of the outlaws and the prisoners, and in Doctor Dick's cabin was found the very bag of gold that had been given for Celeste Seldon's ransom, and the money before taken from the coach, there was no doubting his guilt, and a howl of rage arose against him and his followers.

Later, while Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell, Wallace Weston and Landlord Larry were at Celeste Seldon's cabin, telling her the true story regarding her father, the storm broke in fury and Harding rushed in to say that the miners had seized the outlaw prisoners and were hanging them.

An attempted rescue was made by Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, but in vain; that mob would not, could not be stayed in

its madness and the work of revenge was accomplished.

The next day, as Surgeon Powell had said that the reason of Bernard Brandon could be restored by an operation, Celeste begged him to make the attempt, and to the joy of all it was crowned with perfect success.

With his reason once on its throne again, and learning all that had taken place, Bernard Brandon told how he had been the young partner of Lawyer Edgar Stone, who had kept his friend, Andrew Seldon, away from home by false letters, had written him that Celeste was dead, intending in the end to marry her and get the large fortune for himself, for the estate had greatly increased in value since the departure of its owner.

He had at last decided to go to Celeste and confess all, and learning that he had done so Edgar Stone had fled to save imprisonment.

In atonement Bernard Brandon had come West to find Andrew Seldon, and not hearing from him, Celeste had followed him with the results now known to the reader.

Bernard Brandon hoped that his atonement might win the heart of Celeste, but instead she had dismissed him with liberal payment and placed herself under the guardianship of Wallace Weston, who had taken her father's name.

Bidding adieu to their pards at Last Chance, after sending Harding to the Grand Canyon to join Lucas Langley at the mine, Wallace Weston went East with Celeste, and going to his old home, he told the whole story of his life, and submitted letters from Doctor Powell, Buffalo Bill, and the diary of the outlaw officer as proof of his innocence, so that the charges against him were at once ended by legal process.

Armed with proper papers, he presented himself before the President and received his pardon, after which, with Celeste Seldon as Mrs. Wallace Weston, he went to Fort Faraway and received a welcome from all his old officers and comrades that made his heart glad.

As the mines in the Grand Canyon had ceased panning out as expected, Wallace Weston gave up his interest there to Lucas Langley and Harding, and returned East with his beautiful wife, both of them more than content never to again visit the Wild West, though they have never forgotten Buffalo Bill and his Wizards of the War-path.

THE END

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BUFFALO BILL'S CAREER.

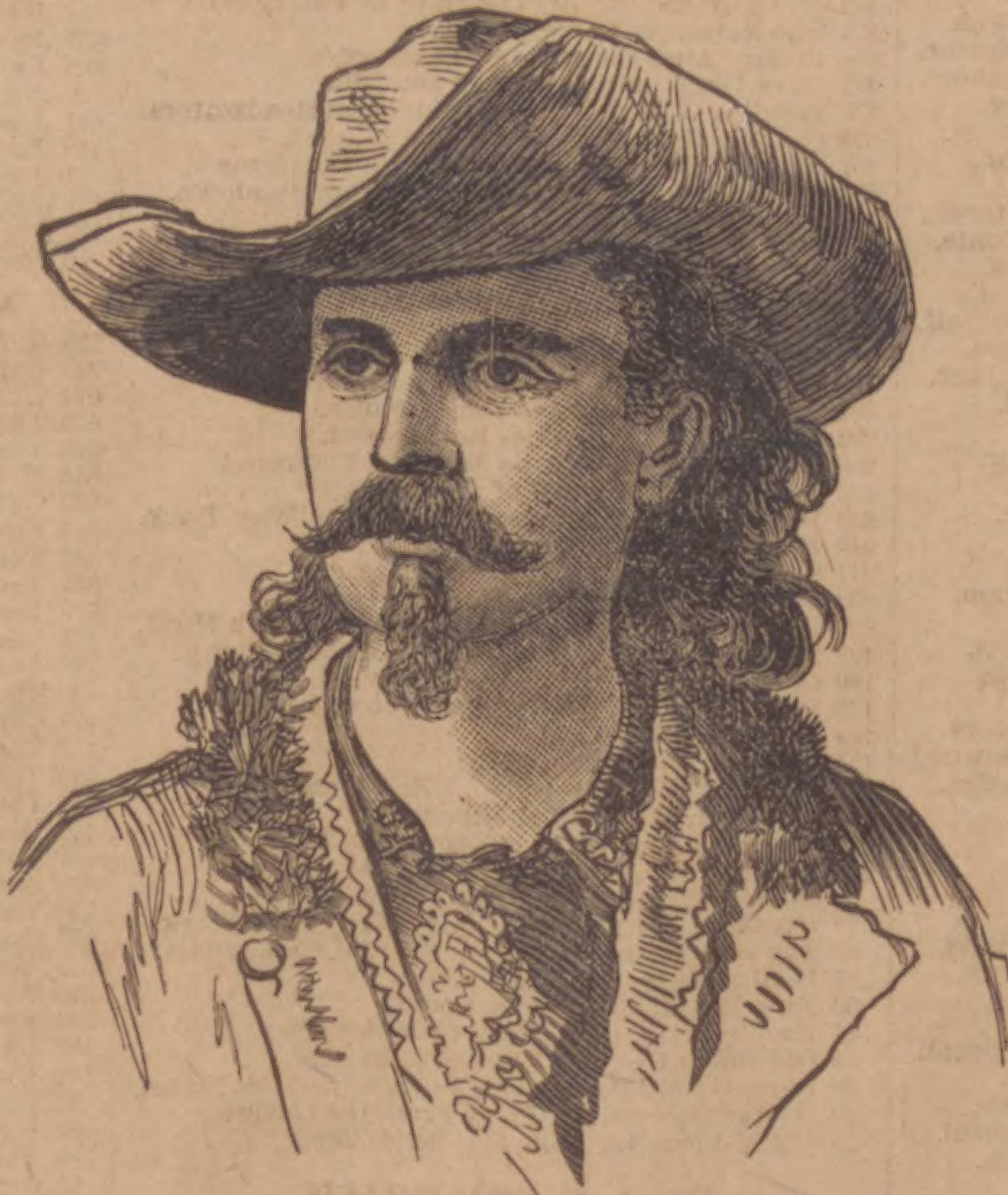
THE career of Buffalo Bill has been, in all respects, remarkable. Probably no living man has seen more life in its most romantic and startling phases, or had a wider range of acquaintance, or has more interested the public in his personal qualities and character.

Coming out of the Wild West when what is now farms, ranches and cattle ranges was the feeding-ground of the buffalo, the home of the untamed Indian, and the haunt of the outlaw—he is, literally, a Child of the Plains—the Knight of the Border—the typical Man of the West.

In early boyhood his father was murdered in the so-called "Kansas war," when ruffians overran Eastern Kansas, and murder, pillage and violence held wild riot. It was then the boy so asserted himself that before he was fifteen years of age, Billy Cody was noted for his nerve, and for his readiness for any dangerous service.

From one daring or arduous performance to another he so progressed in public estimation that when he was eighteen years old he was known from the Missouri to the Red River of Texas as one of the best shots, most expert horsemen, most successful hunters, most daring scouts, most skilled Indian fighters, most sagacious guides, and most fearless Pony Express carrier in all the land.

In such a life the romance writer finds ready-made material; in such a career, acts, and facts, and actualities are but to be reproduced in nar-



BUFFALO BILL.

ative to make a story full of the wildest, keenest, most varied interest. Here is a hero who is no myth, no fiction; and American literature has found in him such a character as gives to it an originality, a virility, that lifts it at once to a new plane.

With his later career the public is familiar. His great WILD WEST SHOW has made his name, in Europe and America, a household word; and now, in Chicago, he will give a crowning glory to his fame by his wonderful Wild West Exhibition, and illustrating in his person, to the assembled millions, the true type of a *Representative American Citizen*.

It has been the good fortune and the exceeding pleasure of the publishers of this series to place before readers a considerable number of stories of the Wild West, from the pens of writers of national fame, in which Buffalo Bill is the central figure, and in which many of his plains pards are associated with him—largely real episodes in his strange and exciting life.

It has also been our special good fortune to obtain from Mr. Cody's own hand a considerable number of romances of wilderness life—of army life, of Indian life, of mountain and mining life, of life on the ranges—in all of which we have what is, unquestionably, some of the most unique, interesting and stirring works in American romance literature.

What they are, the appended list will indicate; and in commending them to the notice of all whose interest in the Wild West has been quickened by this GREAT REALISTIC EXPOSITION, we provide for them a further pleasure, for which, we are sure, they will thank us.

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